

MALOA Calls for Credible, Impartial Audit of SOCFIN

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The Executive Committee and the general membership of Malen Affected Land Owners Association (MALOA), in a press release dated on 6th November, 2020, have expressed dissatisfaction with the process of Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) conducted by System Global Services (SCS) aimed at certifying Socfin Agricultural Company in Malen Chiefdom.

The released, signed by MALOA Chairman, Bockarie M. Koroma, stated that the Executive Committee and the General Membership of MALOA wish to express their dissatisfaction with the refusal of the SCS Global Services Audit Team to hold an open General Meeting at Sahn Malen Court Barray with other membership.

The meeting the release continued, would have given MALOA members the opportunity to acquaint themselves with the RSPO Audit Process and share their experiences on the activities and operations of SOCFIN in Malen Chiefdom, adding that the RSPO criteria and principles proved that affected persons should be heard.

“Unfortunately, a member of the SCS Global Audit Team Mr. Frank Kwesi, had initially accepted to hold the general meeting at Sahn Malen Court Barray, but however later insisted that a meeting with selected representatives of MALOA be held in the SOCFIN’s canteen or outside of the chiefdom, which was rejected by MALOA, because of the transportation costs involved.

Our members have raised serious concerns around SCS Global reliance on a list of carefully selected “Land Owners and Stakeholders” presented to the audit team by SOCFIN to conduct their interviews. The list did not include names of aggrieved Land Owners negatively affected by the operations of SOCFIN.

Furthermore, members have complained about SOCFIN’s provision of lodging and a vehicle to the SCS actions Audit Team. We are concerned that these and others may compromise the neutrality of SCS Global Audit Team as independent auditors and could lead to conflicts of interest that would interfere with the ability of SCS Global to conduct a credible and impartial audit of SOCFIN. MALOA is convinced that an open General Meeting would have greatly helped to build trust in the audit process,” the release ended.

Giving his own side of the story, Public Relations Officer of SOCFIN Agricultural Company Easmon Morguah, said the company has no knowledge about the accusation, adding that as long as SOCFIN is concern, the audit is credible and transparent.

It could be recalled that On 5 March 2011, a lease of over 6,500 hectares of land in the Malen Chiefdom was signed between the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Food Security (MAFFS) of Sierra Leone and the Chiefdom’s traditional authorities. The lease was for a period of 50 years, renewable for an additional 25 years. It was signed by the Paramount Chief of the Malen Chiefdom, BVS Kebbie, and 28 landowners[1]. On the same day, the land was sub-let by the Ministry to SOCFIN Agricultural Company Sierra Leone Ltd. (SAC), a subsidiary of the Belgo-Luxembourgish company SOCFIN.

Affected landowners denounced the lease agreement as illegitimate. They organized themselves under the Malen Affected Land Owners and Users Association (MALOA) and sent in October 2011 a letter to the Pujehun Districts authority voicing the following grievances: A lack of consultation with landowners prior to the agreement of the land lease; pressure, intimidation and threats aimed at coercing landowners to sign over their land; Some land-owners refused to lease their lands but were pressured by the paramount chiefs, who said they would lose their land whether they sign or not. Some people claim not having signed the lease agreement at all but their lands were leased by the paramount chief anyway; a lack of transparency and high levels of corruption in the land acquisition process among others.

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