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Palm oil with contempt for human rights in Congo



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In the Democratic Republic of Congo, AFD has financed a palm oil plantation for eight years, whose managers and security company are accused of murder and land grab. Until they finally distanced themselves from it at the end of 2020.

(By Justine Brabant and Anthony Fouchard (Disclose), originally published by Mediapart, translation globalinfo.nl, (donors welcome!), copied with permission and translated from Mediapart (thanks for that!) Photo MONUSCO Flickr CC2.0)

(The plantations in question have been the property of Unilever for decades. In 2009, they transferred them to the privatized subsidiary Feronia in 2009, against the wishes of the local population . The 'development bank' FMO is involved in the Netherlands with a loan of 16 million. This 'file' will be part of the CICC, at the end of October at Framer Framed in Amsterdam (and online).

See also: [DR Congo: Communities take back control over land stolen from them and urge the oil palm company Feronia to confirm their announcement to "abandon" the land](#)

Lokutu (Democratic Republic of Congo) - The Lokutu oil palm plantation, in the heart of the Democratic Republic of Congo, is so vast it seems deserted. To find the workers among the 20,000 hectares of reclamation, one has to be guided by the sound of machetes, immediately followed by the heavy cracking of a bunch of palm nuts that has fallen to the ground.

On the spot Richard gives the palm leaf a blow with a "chisel", a kind of long sharp axe. Then, with a precise movement, he releases the coveted fruit from the "armpit" of the tree. In less than 20 seconds, it's done. Richard, gleaming with sweat, does not hesitate. And for good reason: to be paid for a full day, he has to harvest between 90 and 110 bunches. A grueling pace for this 38-year-old man who works seven days a week in the palm grove, ten hours a day for a daily wage of 1.23 euros - three times less than the minimum wage in the DRC, and below the poverty line set by the World Bank. has been established (1.62 euros per day).

"If I want to get to this output, I have to start at 6 in the morning," he says, panting. "Everything has to be ready by 4pm, by the time the truck arrives. And even at that pace, it's complicated. Last March, for example, Richard said he was working full-time but was only paid for 21 days of work. Which saddens me does," he says, "is that, even if I work very hard, I don't have enough to feed my family or send my kids to school and run errands."

In eight years, Richard's salary has increased by 50 cents. At the same time, his employer, Feronia, which produces 41,000 tons of palm oil annually - an agro-industry accused of uncontrolled deforestation in the Congo Basin - has received nearly EUR 128 million in support from several European banks. The French Development Agency (AFD) and Proparco, its private sector subsidiary, have provided nearly EUR 25 million of this aid.

Proparco management assures us that this project "meets one of its priorities, which is to contribute to the growth of the agro-industrial sector in Africa, in addition to and in support of family and community farming". Despite eight years of support, this goal has never been achieved.

Salary of 51 euros per month

The story begins in 2012. At that time, the Feronia production site was in disarray. The plantations, which cover the entire Lokutu region, were virtually abandoned: the factory produced only six tons of palm oil a year, and debts were mounting. But nearly 8,000 households depend on the farm. This was enough to make a request for financial support from international donors who aim to improve the living conditions of the local population.

In return for international support, Feronia committed to developing an Environmental and Social Action Plan (ESAP) to benefit the local population and workers. The promise has not been kept: Feronia will continue to be in debt until it goes bankrupt in 2020; as far as the ESAP is concerned, its progress falls far short of international

standards.

Ernest has been working six days a week in the midst of chemical fumes for six years for a monthly salary of 51 euros (120,000 Congolese francs).

On the side of the laterite road, Ernest, shirtless, struggles to don an apparently hand-sewn orange leather protector. The farm worker pulls his blue plastic gloves up to his elbows, puts on his protective visor and loads the huge pesticide aerosol onto his back which he will have to empty around several hundred palm trees. "For three months we have been equipped with masks and visors and our clothes are washed every night in the company," says Ernest, who has been working in the chemical fumes six days a week for a monthly salary of 51 euros (120,000 Congolese francs) for six years. Before that, Ernest and the rest of his team sometimes worked without shoes and with simple surgical masks. When they got home, they had to clean their own chemical-soaked suits every night.

"These improvements are good for us, but they come too late," says Joseph, sitting next to him. The man speaks on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals from his superiors, as was the case in 2019. At the time, members of his team testified in an investigation by the NGO Human Rights Watch into the "undignified and dangerous" working conditions on the plantation. As a result of this research, they were assigned a new, arduous task that had nothing to do with their qualifications: weeding. This is normally the work of the workers," explains Joseph. For two months, without any explanation, the entire team had to remove weeds. When asked about this, the company's general manager promised "to investigate [. ..

At first I thought it was just me, but we talked about it among ourselves and realized we all had the same problem. (Joseph, plantation worker)

Graduated in biochemistry with nearly 10 years of experience, Joseph is not mad. "They've ruined our health," he says. He points to a taboo topic: the problems of sexual impotence that most Feronia workers in crop protection suffer from. "Nobody will tell you this, but after a few years of contact with these products, you can't get an erection anymore," he says. "At first I thought it was just me, but we talked about it and realized we all had the same problem."

More than a dozen employees met by Disclose are said to suffer from the same symptoms. The management of Proparco and other donors are aware of this. When asked, Proparco states that the AFD group "has paid close attention to the civil society reports on Feronia's activities" and "has had regular meetings with NGOs, in particular CCFD-Terre solidaire and Grain, to talk to them." on the development of Feronia's project to remediate and relaunch the plantations, and of course on the land issues and the environmental and social topics of the environmental and social action plan accompanying this investment."

In the area itself, nothing seems to have changed. Ernest still lives with the idea that he might have cancer. "But I'll never know," he says. "If you dare to ask or confide in anyone outside the company, you will be charged with treason. In fact, Feronia oppresses anyone who dares to break the silence."

Five months in prison

This strategy of intimidation does not stop at the gates of the company. Mokilé Iswutele Zouzou, one of the chieftains of the village of Yalifombo, which is a stone's throw from the palm grove, can testify to this. The man receives guests in his modest house made of straw and mud blocks. The company started building a school here three months ago. This pledge was signed in a "cahier de charges" negotiated with the company 4 years ago, in 2017, in exchange for funding from European banks. In this "cahier" the inhabitants demanded, among other things, ten schools, two health centers, road maintenance, private houses for the sector heads, wells, iron roofing sheets and bags of cement.

According to Proparco, more than "\$12 million" has been spent on these various projects. However, most are still under construction or unusable, as evidenced by information available online and internal company reports obtained by Disclose and Mediapart. This is the case with a health center that has been delivered without tables or

chairs, a school whose doors and windows are still not installed, or the road linking Yalifombo to the medical aid station that has never been maintained despite the promise in the specifications. "The truth is that no one really knows what has been done with this money," laments Valentin Brochard, of the NGO CCFD-Terre Solidaire.

For exposing these irregularities along with four other community leaders, Mokilé Iswutele ZouZou was violently arrested at his home one evening in March 2020, around 11 pm. The Congolese police have not given him a statement. There has never been a trial. The five men were released on August 27, 2020, after five months in prison and after paying 40,000 Congolese francs (17 euros per person). "This is what it costs to try and talk to the company..." Mokilé sighs.

Proparco invested in Feronia and washed his hands in innocence about what would happen to the money

For eight years now, AFD has been regularly informed of the abuses of power perpetrated by Feronia, in particular through civil society organisations, including CCFD-Terre Solidaire. The NGO, committed to fighting world hunger and reducing inequalities, has held meetings with Proparco representatives in Paris at least once a year since 2012. A complaint has also been lodged by local communities with the Independent Environmental and Social Complaints Mechanism (ICM), an international body of which Proparco is a member.

In a [12-page document](#) and after two site visits, the Complaints Mechanism's rapporteurs confirmed the admissibility of the complaint and proposed a mediation plan. According to our information, this plan has still not been implemented. Two years after the filing of their complaint, the communities still have no access to justice and the abuses continue. "Proparco invested in Feronia while washing its hands in innocence about what would happen to its money," said Valentin Brochard, CCFD-Terre Solidaire's representative. He concludes: "This is contrary to all official commitments of the AFD group."

When asked about the living and working conditions of the plantation workers, Proparco believes that "progress" has been made, including "the use of more permanent workers" (rather than seasonal workers) and an increase in wages that are now "above the national minimum wage".

As for Feronia (which changed name after bankruptcy, see below), the general manager explains the very low number of social or economic achievements by the fact that the plantation was "unprofitable for many years". "The prioritization of the investments was thus focused on the industrial and agronomic activities in order to achieve financial sustainability [...]"

16,600 Euros to "stop harassing the company"

The plantation's lack of profitability does not explain everything. For example, it does not explain the [land grabbing allegations against](#) Feronia. In 2015, the company split the plantation into 138 concessions, making its management shady, with no local communities ever involved. The AFD branch never seems to have cared about these allegations. During several meetings with civil society organisations, Proparco's representatives have reportedly transferred the responsibility for this verification to its "European counterparts".

Feronia and her "plantation security" security company are also the subject of numerous allegations of human rights violations. For example, on February 21, a young man, Blaise Mokwe, had to cross the company's plantations to visit his mother, who was located 25 kilometers from Lokutu, in the small village of Mosite. With a machete in hand, as is often the case in this area, Blaise was stopped by the company's "industrial guards". "They thought he was a palm nut thief and beat him up," his older brother, Eddy Baitata Lisemu, said. He was taken to Lokutu Prison, but released several hours later and died later that night.

I had the nerve to ask them to provide us with a vehicle to bury him. They refused. (Eddy Batata Lisemu, brother of the victim)

According to a medical report that Disclose obtained, the young man died of a "broken right forearm" and a traumatic chest wound. The next day, the company will pay the family 86 euros (200,000 Congolese francs) for the coffin. "I had the nerve to ask them to provide us with a vehicle to bury him. They refused," says the victim's brother. In response, he put Blaise's body outside the gates of the company. This was enough to convince Feronia's managers, who then paid an additional 215 euros (500,000 Congolese francs) for the funeral.

To this end, Eddy has to sign two "acknowledgment documents" stating the amount spent by the company. The copy dated February 23, 2021, signed by representatives of Ferronia, states that Eddy, "responsible for the late Blaise Mokwe Matu, who was tortured by the company guards of the PHC company, acknowledges that he owed the sum of 500,000 CFA francs from said company recorded".

But what could have been a simple "cultural" compensation, given the customs and customs in the area, ended up looking like a genuine desire to legally bury the matter. A delegation of local authorities, chaired by the provincial interior minister, quickly intervened with the Mokwe family. They insisted that Eddy prepare a "list of charges", a sort of list of grievances over their relative's murder. A conciliation resolution paper was printed on April 30, 2021. For a handsome amount (16,600 euros), the Mokwe family has to sign a "deed of recognition" that ends with this last sentence: "We request all members of the family not to disturb the said company".

When asked about this payment, and about the fact that it might have been made to dissuade the family from filing a complaint, Feronia simply replied that the payment was made "following a public mediation [...] in which the various parties were present".

When asked about Blaise Mokwe's case, and more broadly about the allegations of assault, violence, corruption, attempts to obstruct justice and arbitrary arrests, Proparco stated that the "stated facts and testimony were extremely shocking" and that they "condemned these actions", while stressing that she had no ties with Feronia since November 2020.

Killed for a plastic chair

In 2020 Feronia went bankrupt and the development banks almost all withdrew from the project. The plantation was acquired by a Mauritius-based investment fund, Straight KKM 2 Limited. In a concise press release, published in April 2021, the AFD group notes "the end of [its] indirect holding" in the company. However, the AFD did not answer our questions about the amount of financial losses generated by this investment.

In Lokutu, the workers and the village communities do not have any information about the legal developments of the company. Papy Lonkonfo, the company's head of social services, drily states, "What would be here without this company? It's better than nothing." Until the legal situation is clarified, the residents and workers of the palm groves will have to make do with "better than nothing" for some time to come.

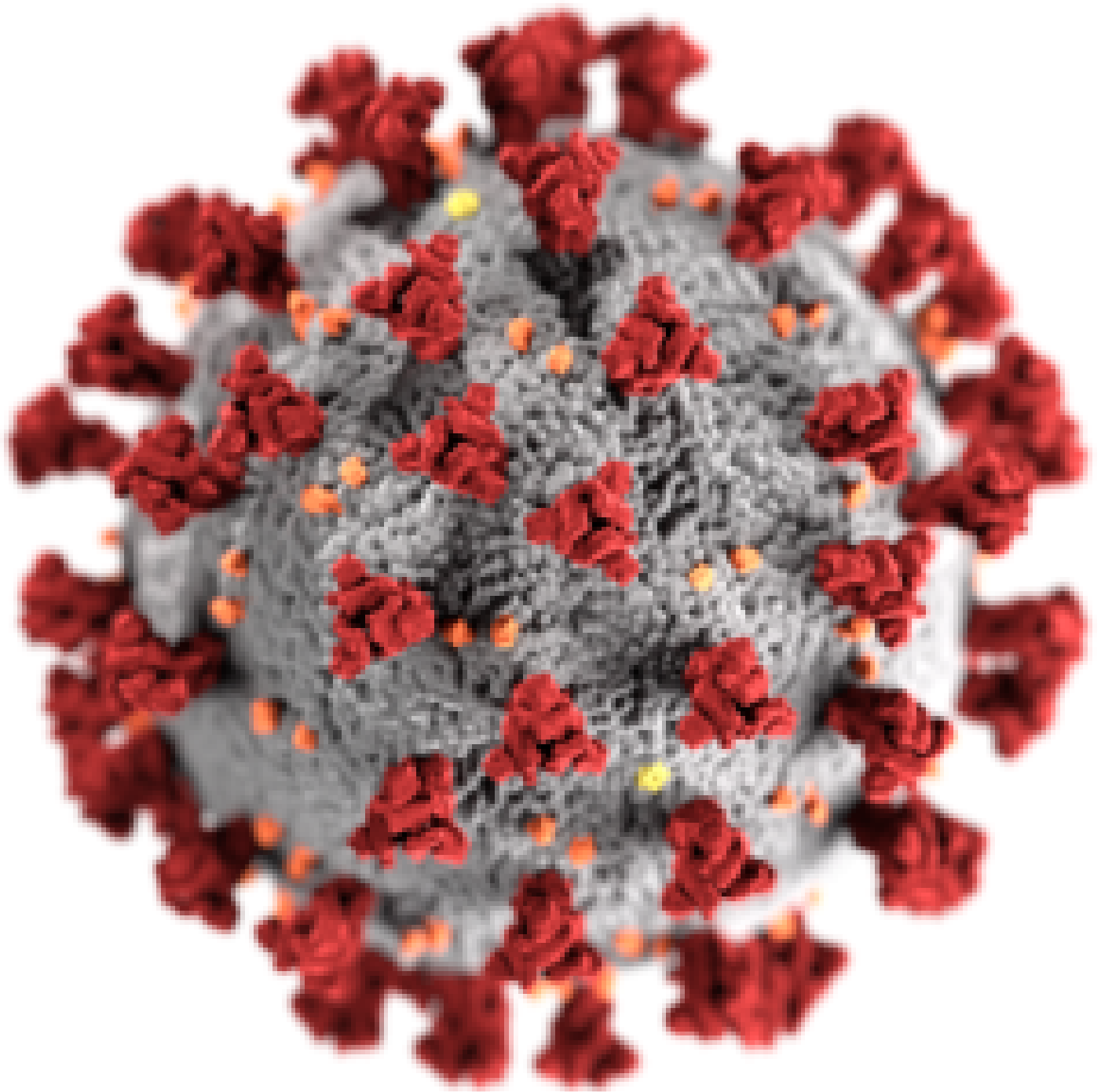
As for the plantation managers, they don't seem to have changed their methods. In March 2021, another man was killed in obscure circumstances. Manu Efolafola, accused of stealing a plastic chair, was rowed down the river in a canoe by a plantation security man and police officers when he fell into the water, handcuffed with a rope. His body has never been found.

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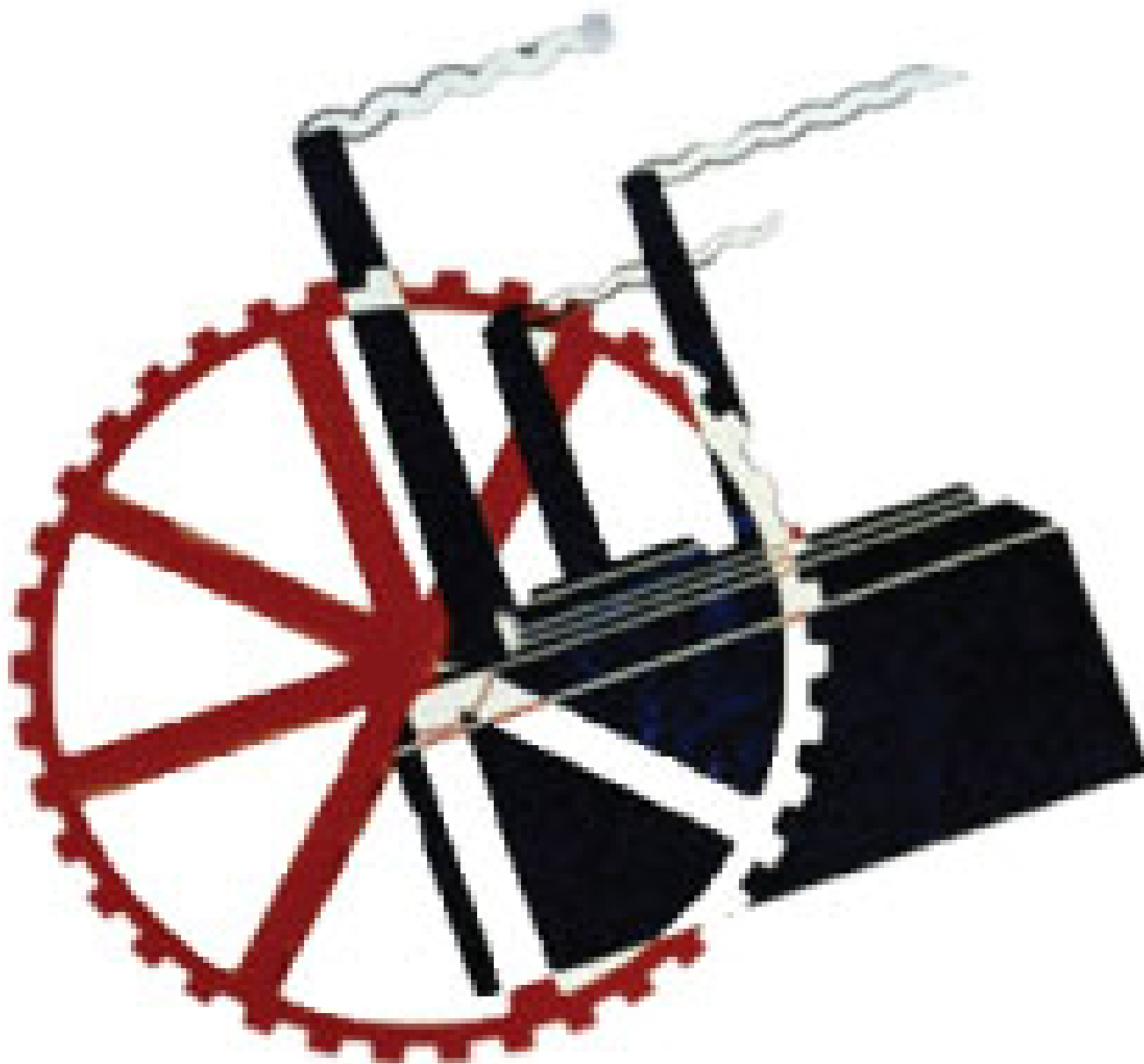
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