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Farmers, CSOs Rally Behind Environmentalist Jailed for Exposing Land Grabbing in Cameroon

By Mbom Sixtus

YOUNDE, Cameroon, Dec 15 2015 (IPS) - Farmers and activists in Cameroon say a jail sentence handed down on an environmentalist who exposed land-grabbing by a multinational agro-industrial company, sends a dangerous signal to communities trying to protect their land and resources.

Nasako Bessingi, Director of Struggle to Economize Future Environment, SEFE, was sentenced on November 3, by a court in Mundemba, a small village in Cameroon's southwest region. The SG-SOC company, a subsidiary of the New York-based Herakles Farms and two of his former employees sued him for defamation.

The verdict: a fine of just over 1,800 dollars or 3-years imprisonment. He was also ordered to pay damages of about 18,000 dollars to the two civil parties and costs of about 364 dollars. Nasako was given 24 hours to pay the fine otherwise he faces jail for 3 years.

Nasako says his NGO has paid the fine "Just to have time to do other things while our lawyer Adolf Malle follows up an appeal at the southwest regional Court of Appeal."

Recounting his plight to IPS, he said Herakles Farms sued him following government's suspension of its activities. He also revealed to IPS he had written petitions against the company in which he accused its officials of lying to villagers.

In his complaints, he notified the government of the company's activities, clearing, felling trees and planting nurseries pending authorization, which he called illegal. He said he had also reported claims by the multinational firm that it had authorization to acquire 73,000 hectares of land on a 99 year-lease at the cost at about 50 cents per hectare per year.

"My complaint was filed in August 2012 and in November 2013, President Paul Biya signed a decree, limiting the company to 19,843 hectares of land in Cameroon and to pay seven dollars per hectare per year." The company abandoned the project.

Going by Nasako, the initial suit filed by the company, charged him with inciting the government to suspend the activities of the company, but during the proceedings which took close to two years, the company modified its claims and emphasized on defamation.

Nasako led journalists from both the local and international media to cover conflicts between Herakles Farms (SG-SOC) and communities of the Mundemba sub-division in the southwest of Cameroon. He was attacked in the forest a few days later on his way to an interior village in the subdivision for a sensitization campaign.

In his report of the incident, a copy of which he forwarded to Bruce Wrobel, (now deceased), the CEO of the company at the time, stating that he had identified the attackers as workers of his company.

"They used the report against me claiming I defamed the company, whereas there were many witnesses at the scene of the event," Nasako said. "I filed a complaint in court against the company, but they too filed one at the same time and for some reasons, the court decided to listen to the multinational firm."

Several environmental NGOs, some of which were equally against the land grabbing attempts of Herakles Farms, have denounced the verdict which to them is unjust. Nasako says he is comforted by officials of local and international NGOs including Nature Cameroon, Cultural Survival, the African Coalition Against Land Grabbing, Green Peace among other sympathizers.

To Samuel Nguiffo, Coordinator of the Yaounde-based Center for Environment and Development, CED, "The conviction of Nasako Besingi, which follows a series of other procedures, suggests a desire to intimidate environmental activists, in a context marked by the proliferation of investments in land and natural resources, which strongly encroach on village land."

A statement from the Amy Moas, a US-based Senior Forest Campaigner and Eric Ini, an Africa Forest Campaigner for Green Peace, says Nasako is "Guilty for nothing more than exercising his democratic right to protest." They hold that Herakles Farms has consistently worked to silence its critics and that the activist has been intimidated and assaulted in recent years.

Chief Alexander Ekperi of Esoki, one of the villages affected by the Herakles agro-industrial project told IPS that as a traditional ruler, he was a middleman between the investors and the indigenes. He said his people depend on farming and without land they will be idle and poor.

"I am 100 per cent in support of Nasako. The company concealed information from us. We were fooled our village will be developed but Nasako and other environmentalist educated us on the project and we realized the company was going to exploit both timber and non-timber products, grab our farmland and leave people stranded. We were not even aware of how much land the company was grabbing," he said.

The traditional ruler complained, "Even our people, like Dr. Blaise Mekole who were close to the investors have vanished and no longer communicate with us. People are looking up to me to pay for some work they did for the company, whereas I was given a fake ECOBANK cheque. It was a mafia (incident) and we regret the person who exposed it is getting a heavy sentence."

Peter Okpo Wa-namolongo who lives in one of the villages in the Korup National Park, believes Nasako's verdict was unjust. "I don't know if some of our elite are truly Cameroonians, because when it comes to money, they don't feel for their own people. The investors give us oil, food and beer and pay the elite huge amounts of bribe money for our land," he said.

Wa-namolongo pointed out, "These big companies have money. They pay their way into places and I'm sure even the judges received their money. I am strongly against what is happening to Nasako."

Mosembe Cornelius, owner of a vast farmland that was coveted by Harakles farms told IPS that "The main problem is that government has incomplete information about the crisis. I would have lost my own seven hectares if environmentalists were not here to help."

Before Mosember could finish his statement, another villager, Edwin Njio joined in and said, "Environmentalists helped us meet international lawyers who exposed the illegality of the company. We would be dead without our land. We the villagers are very angry."

He also said, "We were treated as animals but we now understand our rights. If Nasako is convicted then the whole of Cameroon should be jailed. Even our chiefs (traditional rulers) treated us as if we don't deserve respect."

But Chief Eben Joseph sees things conversely. He is one of the traditional rulers in whose jurisdiction Herakles Farms' project was being set up. "This project was going to bring development to my village. The head of state wants Cameroon to be emergent by 2035. How can we get there without foreign investments?" he asked.

Quizzed on the disparities in the amount the company paid per hectare on the annual basis and what was later determined by the head of state, as well as the surface area of land they initially wanted to exploit and the limitations by the 2013 Presidential Decree, Chief Eben stated he is a businessman.

"One cannot invest where he will not make profit. You go where you will make the highest profit. Gulf Oil had a permit to exploit oil in the Bakassi Peninsular in the 1970s, they claimed to the government the oil was little and sold their permit to Pecten which then exploited oil for about 30 years. Pecten recently sold the same area to Addax Petroleum which is still exploiting oil where Gulf Oil had claimed had little oil. It's just business," he said.

The traditional ruler said the government would have been collecting taxes from Herakles Farms while villagers enjoy some royalties. "Nasako and I have been friends for long, he always sees things from his own unique way. But he is not above the law. I will not say whether his court sentence was right or wrong."

To Chief Orume, another traditional ruler in the region, “I knew this company will bring development to my village which is in a conservative area with community forests and a national park. I knew they would construct roads to ferry their produce out of the forest. But I am surprised they have just disappeared and we don’t know when they will be back.”

Though grappling with an appeal, Nasako told IPS that he has received complaints from laid-off workers of Herakles Farms. “They made severance payments to some workers in July 2015 promising to pay 70 other workers on September 30 but did not,” he said.

The company wrote an appeal to Cameroon’s presidency on October 3, pleading the government should intervene in court cases against the company. Jonathan Watts, the company’s Chief Operations Manager, sent a letter saying the company spent funds on court cases and said that the government should help dismiss the cases so that the company could focus on producing palm oil, which is a disputed product in ecological circles as it destroys forests.

(End)

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