



## Palm oil land grab during Liberian ebola crisis caused abuses

Published: 23 Jul 2015

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TeleSur| 23 July 2015

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A new report details harassment and violence toward communities to coerce them into signing away their land to a major palm oil company.

Massive land grabs in Liberia by a major foreign agribusiness company at the peak of the Ebola outbreak have had a hand in the harassment and violence faced by Liberians speaking out against palm oil expansion, a new report released Thursday claims.

According to the expose by Global Witness, Liberian state authorities are helping pave the way for the company Golden Veroleum Liberia (GVL) to expand its already sprawling palm oil production by criminalizing grassroots opposition and pressuring communities to give up their land rights in the face of state-sanctioned harassment and violence.

Global Witness revealed that between August and November last year, during the height of Liberia's Ebola crisis, GVL signed four memorandums of understanding with communities by bringing together huge meetings of hundreds of people to encourage them to sign away thousands of acres worth of land rights, all under the watchful eye of local authorities.

All together, GVL scooped up more than 33,000 acres of communally owned farmland. "Liberia is rolling out the red carpet to a company that has swindled communities, forcibly grabbed land and chain-sawed its way through rainforests in Asia," said Global Witness campaign leader Jonathan Gant in a statement Thursday. "With the company's first foray into Africa, at the peak of the continent's deadliest Ebola epidemic, it is has manipulated villagers into signing away the lands they depend on."

With families and their descendents unlikely to ever have their land returned, the manipulative land grab is expected to impact at least five generations, Grant added.

Local dissent against the GVL land grab was silenced by beatings, threats, and arbitrary detention, Global Witness revealed, though the company denies any involvement.

While communities have been swindled into agreeing to be robbed of their land, the benefits received in return have been negligible. According to Global Witness, the only identifiable kickback for the community, aside from any benefits received by those directly employed by the GVL, has been six new toilets.

"Palm oil developers are selling Liberians what may turn out to be false promises of a better future," said Grant, comparing palm oil to the fake snake oil hawked by U.S. con-artists to unknowing buyers with fabricated claims of magical medicinal powers. "They are tricking communities into giving up the land they rely on for food and livelihoods and giving them very little, if anything, in return," said Gant.

Liberia lacks legal structures to regulate the massive expansion of plantations and hold agribusiness accountable for their actions in the country where 10 percent of total territory is now earmarked for agricultural plantation development.

In light of the GVL's land grabs, violent abuses, and the legal void that could easily lead to a repeat of similar issues, Global Witness has called on the Liberian government to investigate the case and introduce legislation governing the agricultural sector and protecting the land rights of rural communities.



A Golden Veroleum Liberia plantation in Liberia. Photo: Global Witness

The **Declaration of the Global Convergence of Land and Water Struggles** launched in Dakar at the African Social Forum in October 2014 and reworked in Tunis at the World Social Forum in March 2015 is open for signature and engagement.

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information and support they need to negotiate on their own terms,” said Grant. “Until that time, the government should stop Golden Veroleum from expanding onto new land, and set a precedent for the other foreign companies poised to cash in on Liberia’s vast natural wealth.”

“Development is not development if it involves robbing the country’s poorest citizens of their land,” Grant added.

African oil palm is a non-food crop that is considered a “flex crop” because it can be sold for multiple other uses including for cooking oil, food additives, cosmetics, industrial uses like plastics and explosives, and biofuel.

Chemically-intensive to produce and farmed as a monoculture, African oil palm plantation development is very often linked to land grabbing, displacement and human rights abuses, labor exploitation, reduced local food security, and huge environmental consequences including deforestation and wildlife habitat destruction.


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