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**INTERVIEW: 10 Okomu Oil workers killed in last five years, MD says; speaks on illegal logging**

## *The Edo State-based oil palm company says it is struggling with criminals who destroy nearby forests, steal its products and attack staff.*

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**Okomu Oil Palm** is one of Nigeria's leading oil palm companies listed on the Nigeria Exchange. It has a plantation that covers an area of 33, 112 hectares, of which 18, 879 hectares currently has oil palm trees and 7,335 hectares has rubber trees.

In this interview with PREMIUM TIMES, the company's Managing Director, Graham Hefer, highlights how the activities of illegal loggers near its plantation are affecting the company's operations and depleting Nigeria's forest cover. He speaks on ongoing efforts and strategies adopted to check unsustainable environmental practices by people he described as "hoodlums".

He said illegal loggers do not just do illegal logging but also steal the company's products (palm fruits and rubber). Mr Hefer said over 10 officials of the company have been killed by the intruders in the last five years.

### **Excerpt:**

**PT: There is this issue of illegal logging around your space of operation. How has that been and what's your experience like with this act?**

**Hefer:** This act (illegal logging) is a proven fact that it's out of control at this point in time. You know we are operating next towards the Okomu National Park and also close to a forest reserve. We have drones that monitor our boundary zones. If you go on the other side into the national park and the forest reserves, you will see unmitigated destruction of the forests in the national park as well as in the forest reserves. At our last count when we put a drone across from the Okomu River which is the southern boundary, going about 300 metres we picked up more than 117 illegal logging camps. So it is a wholesale slaughter of the forest's trees. We have spoken and given the evidence to the forestry unit and Ministry of Environment. The governor of the state is very keen to remove this scourge of illegal logging. If you look at the Okomu River about a week ago, the area forestry officers accompanied by the marine police impounded and stamped about 375 logs on the river. They also

impounded a lorry that was coming across with more than 400 planks. So it is never ending. The biggest concern we have is not for ourselves, but for the national park, where the wholesale slaughter of trees is taking place. The good thing I think that has happened in the last couple of week is that the National Park in Nigeria has agreed to go into a partnership with African Nature Investment (ANI) in order to try and see how they can preserve what is left of the forests (flora and fauna). So that may help because they are busy training the rangers now to go out and do better work. Also, with the conjunction with the Edo state government, ANI has now gotten a 30-year contract to sort out and preserve the Okomu forests reserves, including having to train more than a hundred forest officers. So that will help in the long term. But right now, if we don't stop the wholesale slaughter it is going to be a disaster zone.

**PT: How long do you think the activities of illegal logging have been happening within these areas?**

**Hefer:** I have been here for 16 years and it was happening before I met here. But it got progressively worse. I would say in the last two to three years it has gotten out of hand completely.

**PT: How is this affecting your operations here in the Okomu Oil Plantation Company?**

**Hefer:** What happens is that the illegal loggers don't normally just do illegal logging. They steal my products on the sideline. For instance, they steal my banga (palm fruits) and rubber. So it is a problem for us in that these people illegally in the national park and the forest reserve belt do a multiplicity of illegal acts including murdering my employees to get the products. In the last five years we have lost more than 10 people due to acts of robbery and assault to the point where I have to have security 24/7 to protect my people and products. So it is seriously a major problem for us, because first of all, these people are there to do bad things. So the sooner they can stop the illegal logging the sooner they would move away and stop the product thefts as well. So we do need government and police and security forces intervention.

**PT: Amidst ongoing measures by your company to curb the problem of theft and murder of staff within your space of operations like you have mentioned, so far, how supportive has the state government been in this regard?**

**Hefer:** In recent months, Governor Obaseki's government, including himself, has been very vocal and helpful, especially on the security fronts. Because I cannot go outside of my company's boundaries. I am limited to that, that is my jurisdiction. I

can only protect if they come across. Until recently, nothing has happened. There has been no active policing and it got to a point where most of the bandits and hoodlums are running to the forests now because there is no police, army; there is nothing. The governor is cognizant of these and you will see that he is not just trying to clean most of the forest reserves in Edo State. We really support him in that regard and we hope to make sure that we can offer resources where we can to assist him in that regard.

**PT: So were you able to identify the “red spots” where these activities thrive within your plantation?**

**Hefer:** Well, we don't have forests other than our High Conservation Value Areas (HCVAs). More than 10 per cent of our total areas are under these HCVs which are forests. So we try to protect those to the best of our ability. Sometimes we do have issues where illegal loggers come in to cut the trees down, but we try with our security people to limit that as much as possible because obviously, it causes problems for us. We are under a certification scheme called Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO). It is basically like an ISO or so certification. It is renowned and it is worldwide accepted as a certification whereby the company that makes palm oil does everything right in terms of people, planet, and profitability. You know we look after all of those things to make it a sustainable company, which includes looking after the forests, so if we do not, we would not be certified. So we take it very seriously. Yes, it has affected us because we have seen some occasions, but it is by far very much less in our HCVAs than in the National park per se and also in the forest reserves.

**PT: How do you think the illegal logging acts are affecting the fight against climate change impacts in the country?**

**Hefer:** I am sure there would be some repercussions and negativity in terms of whether the rain falls in the same pattern or the same density as what it used to. For me, it is more of the fact that we have to make sure that the resources are looked after. If we can sustainably look after our resources, we would not have all this wholesale destruction that we see, and there needs to be law and order, without laws and order you cannot do anything. There is 800 square kilometres or more from here down to “gelegele” without one policeman or a soldier, nobody. When you jump over the Okomu river, it is anyone's place. So that is the biggest problem that I think we

have at hand. If we can get law and order and then we can control the resources, it will become sustainable then I think things would work better.

**PT: Are they some specific tree species that these guys (illegal loggers) are after or do they just cut down any trees they see standing?**



**Hefer:** They were initially after the hardwoods but it is anything that is left, that is all. So it is mainly the softwoods that are coming out now because the hardwoods are all gone. That is the problem and that's why they are moving into the National park because that is the only area that has hardwood of any note left. But soon that is going to finish as well.

**PT: Have you been able to partner with the National Park to see how secure these boundaries are or are there any sort of mutual relationship existing between your company and the National Park?**

**Hefer:** Sure! We have an MoU even with the Okomu National Park and like I said we also have a partnership with ANI as well as the National Park to see how we can protect not just the fauna but the flora as well. Most of our HCVA's link up with the National park so we have animals moving backwards and forwards. So we are very serious about making sure that the Okomu National Park does not become depleted like most of the forests in the Okomu section here. We are very serious about that. We have done a lot of sponsorships and donations to the National Park over the years. We have been with them now for at least ten years, helping them when we can with resources like vehicles, fixing of vehicles, fuels, building housing for the staff and a number of other things. . We are very very close to them.

**PT: How do you think the illegal logging activities have also affected the smallholder farmers within?**

**Hefer:** I think what has happened is that because there are no more forests, the Taungya farmers are coming in. I get to know that because when I go down to visit communities where we do a lot of corporate social responsibility work, our company spent more than N250 million on communities within our footprints for projects such as building schools, housing, foodstuffs, nursing and teachers. We also help smallholder farmers with stuff like fertilisers, wheelbarrows and other equipment. Yes, it will certainly affect them. I don't think at the end of the day you are going to

remove the people. ANI I know has a plan going forward where they are trying to make a sustainable network of farming along with forestry going forward. But first one has to get the law and order there first. The illegal loggers and anybody wanting to do illegal things should be minimised so that those people who wish to do livelihood that is not illegal are able to come onboard.

**PT: We understand that bad behaviours are sometimes products of ignorance. Do you have any sort of awareness program for communities within your premises on the need for forest conservation?**

**Hefer:** I agree with you 100 per cent. Ignorance is no excuse in the law. At the end of the day, somebody knows what they are doing wrong. I would agree to a point where a person does not realise that if you keep cutting trees down, cutting trees down nothing happens. I can even say that the most ignorant people would soon know that they cannot find the kind of trees that they used to want to find anymore and they would ask the question why? That to me is not a good one. I agree with you that there is probably not enough sensitisation, again I feel it is not because our company has not been doing anything, but I would put the blame squarely on the government, because the government was in charge of these forest reserves. In the past, I am sorry to say that the government mismanaged it to a greater or lesser extent. Also there were a lot of problems in terms of extortion and corruption between both government and also people and companies which led to the wholesale destruction that we see today. Hopefully with the new forestry commission that the governor has put in place, we would see that it will minimise and hopefully eliminate it, so that we can get a better managed system of forest reserves in Edo state. I agree with you again 100 per cent that we need to have the whip and also the book so people would understand that this is not what is going to be happening going forward. Sensitisation does need to occur absolutely.

**PT: We understand that the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has affected the production of sunflower oil and its derivatives, pushing many people back to oil palm production. Have you been able to leverage this as an opportunity to reposition yourself in the global oil market? How has it been so far over this period?**

**Hefer:** Well, I mean we have not expanded for the last couple of years. We have been doing more or less the same amount of oil every year. So for us it has not been of great significance to us. Whereas the price increase has nothing to do with the Russia-Ukrainian war, it has to do with how the economy has been managed well or

otherwise. So that led to the hyper inflation, that is why the prices have gone up. But our volumes have remained fairly consistent, but the prices have also gone up because inflation is just affecting everybody. That has been the major issue that we have had. Also, we just don't willingly not intend to expand. We expand if we have the funds or my board decides that we want to do that. We would look first of all to ensure that everything is done correctly according to RSPO certification rules and guidelines, so we don't like to have issues of land grabbing and the like. So that we would be completely in the green. We would follow those very stringently.



### ***Packaged Okomu oil***

**PT: Early this year you had incidents of people invading and burning down part of your rubber plantation, with some attributing it to land grabbing and the like. How have you been able to manage the situation to prevent such from reoccurring in the future?**



### ***Burnt rubber plantation***

**Hefer:** Those people that came to attack are the very hoodlums that I was talking about earlier; they either do illegal logging or they steal our products. That basically has nothing to do with land grabbing. Land grabbing normally comes from NGOs that have specialised interest or self interest. We have all of the documentation. The Edo State has what they call the Ministry of Land and Survey. You have to be registered with that ministry and all of our documentation there has been done. The other good thing about our company is that we have never taken over a new company, in other words, green field projects. We have always bought from another company or from the government. In that case the government is the one that originally started it or another company. So that company has been there for a certain year or the government has been there for a certain number of years. So effectively it is not that we would come and say we like this piece of land we are going to take it over.