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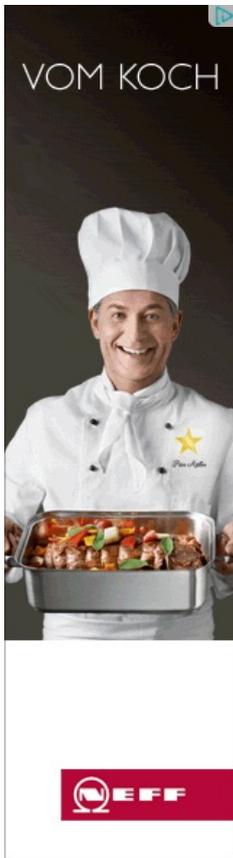
Ugandans displaced by UK company landgrab, says Oxfam report

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Posted Thursday, September 22 2011 at 14:51

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KAMPALA, Thursday

At least 22,500 Ugandans were forced from their homes to make way for a British timber company, the aid agency Oxfam said in a report Thursday calling for an investigation into alleged abuses.

London-based New Forests Company signed a deal with Ugandan authorities to develop 20,000 hectares of timber plantations in 2004, resulting in often violent evictions from the Namwasa and Luwunga forest reserves, Oxfam said.

"The people evicted from the land are desperate, having been driven into poverty and landlessness," the report read, noting evictions stopped in July 2010.

"In some instances they say they were subjected to violence and their property, crops, and livestock destroyed," it added.

While both Ugandan officials and the company say that the people were living illegally on the land, many of those evicted claim they were granted the right to live there by previous governments decades ago.

"When they told us to leave, many had nowhere to go, so we resisted. We were evicted in a violent way. (Armed men) slashed my banana plantation and

destroyed my home," one mother of eight told Oxfam.

Despite hopes local residents would receive compensation or be resettled, and a 2009



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court injunction stopping the evictions, none of the displaced people received compensation, the report says.

"I have lost what I owned. Where I am now, my kids cry every day. I cannot sustain them and they do not go to school. Even eating has become a problem," another former resident told Oxfam.

Founded in 2004 and part owned by HSBC bank, New Forests Company aims to become the biggest forester in East Africa and has received a 5 million euro (\$6.7 million) loan from the European Investment Bank to develop one of its Uganda plantations.

The company, which describes itself as "a sustainable and socially responsible" forestry company, is also active in Tanzania, Mozambique and, most recently, Rwanda.

Despite allegations from former residents that New Forests officials took part in the evictions, the company says the evictions were entirely carried out by the Ugandan authorities and were not violent.

"There were no incidences of injury, physical violence, or destruction of property during the voluntary vacation process that have been brought to the attention of (New Forests Company)," the firm wrote in a letter to Oxfam this month.

The company also says that the terms of its agreement with Uganda bar it from offering any compensation to the evicted people, the report said.

Ugandan officials insisted that the people had been living in the area illegally and denied that the evictions had been violent.

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