

Despite The Odds, PAMOL Plantations Must Forge Ahead

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 By **Bouddih Adams**

www.CameroonPostline.com — The Interim General Manager, IGM, Charles Okon Mekanya, of PAMOL Plantations PLC, has implored all workers of the company to put their hands on deck for the company to flourish for the good of the staff, the area and the country in general. Mekanya was speaking to the press after a recent ecumenical service the company organised in honour of its departed General Manager, Chief Obi Okpun Wanobi Osang, at the Lobe Estates. Read on:

How is the company faring, since the death of the late General Manager, Chief Obi Okpun Wanobi Osang?

I think, so far, we are faring well in the management of PAMOL. There has been no change since our General Manager left us. All we've tried to do is to continue with the activities he left and the basic thing is that, immediately we lost him, we continued with the normal activities, and the first thing we did was preparing for the peak season because this is the period when we get crops.

From our nomenclature, crop means production from the fields. Between now and June is our peak period, since we get the maximum production of crop. So, what we do is concentrate more on the field to get the entire crop and get a maximum from it because the crop periods are sometime too low and the overhead becomes too high.

So, the basic thing we set out was how to compensate for the low crop we have, since more than 60 percent of the plantation is above economic lifespan of 25 years and harvesting cost is very high. The fields are dirty; we haven't had enough money to clean them and so it shall cost us much. We have seen that what we can do is to concentrate more on buying small holders crops to cater for a lot of what we don't have on the field.

We're trying to see that the factories are working well to be able to cope with the season because, you know that our factories are very old. That of Lobe is as old as since 1967 and that of Ndian dates back to 1950, which we are managing to keep up to date. We're lucky we're going through it. From there, we can say that, so far, we are fine in terms of management.

That will mean also that the workers' entitlements are being taken care of or are there are no problems with salaries?

Since December, we've managed to pay our salaries. We've just paid the salaries of February.. We've had no problems this far. The general climate is calm. We've had no complaints. We had arrears of payment for leave which we are trying to fix out.

We're trying to see that those who have overdue leave, we gradually phase them out because it is the right of every worker to proceed on leave and have rest. But we were constrained by finances not to send lots of people on leave. So, we had this number of people who didn't go on leave, but we are trying to see that they go on leave and I'm sure in six months, we can liquidate all their arrears.

(Enter Finance & Administration Manager, Albert Kamadje): Just in addition to the regular payment of salaries which was mentioned; since December, I think we've had accrued payments of suppliers, especially contracts which were supposed to be financed by Yaounde, because they committed us to launch tenders and we had to use money meant for normal daily operations of the company's activities to pay those suppliers.

It is in the neighbourhood of almost FCFA 800 Million. What was carried forward was about FCFA 1.2 billion in which we had about FCFA 800 million for heavy duty equipment. What PAMOL paid on behalf of government as at now is above FCFA 500 million. But, we have other internal debts for suppliers which

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we are liquidating. This is what makes up the FCFA 1.2 billion.

Mr. IGM, during the ecumenical service, most of the speakers made allusion to the fact that the atmosphere has not been convivial after the demise of Chief Wanobi Okpun. Would you want to throw more light on the “hot atmosphere” they referred to?

Here in PAMOL, I'll try to say that we have not felt that “hot atmosphere” as those in the public claim because we've been working and have not seen anywhere that people have manifested any signs of discontent. We're working well, to the best of my knowledge, except some other Managers might have noticed it, but I have not. It is true that there have been some rumours (but we don't work on rumours) that people are “hot” about the death of the General Manager; which is but normal for those who were very close to him.

But for those who think they could only work with the General Manager, good and fine for them. This is a company that belongs to everybody. This is not an individual's company. People come and go. The Timti's, the Kimbeng's were here. Anybody will come and go at their appointed time and it depends on God alone. So, anybody who thinks that he doesn't want to join the team to work together, I think it's up to him/her.

This company has rules and regulations which bind all who work here. They are the rules and regulations that we follow to push forward the activities of the company. When they make allusion to what happened in Mamfe, I understand that the atmosphere was hostile to the PAMOL personnel who were there. But as I said earlier, when people are emotionally overtaken, everybody has their own way of reaction.

It would appear, the population, I was told, thought that PAMOL has killed their General Manager and, such a story, we wouldn't take lightly. Nobody would. They have a right to their emotions and they made the atmosphere too uncomfortable for the workers and that is why the Board Chairman had to declare that for the safety of the workers, nobody should go to the village. That is what, I think he meant.

There are some specific allegations that cropped up and which have been in some media after the death of the former GM. It is said the Financial Manager was the first to discover that the GM was dead. Can you tell us your own side of the story?

As far as I know, he wasn't the first person. I think it is Dr. Tabeta who is alleged to have been the first person because he was the one who called me.

(Enter Kamadje): I just want to answer that specific question. All this issue was investigated by the judiciary and reports made. So, it is not my place to come back to it. Just to answer your question that: was I the first person who saw the GM dead in his room? I say, no! I was called by PAMOL's Board Chairman on phone and at the same time, they were knocking at my door and I met the PAMOL Board Chairman with Chief James Tabeta Azotakang and three other persons.

The other story that came out was that the GM ordered for the arrest of a certain James. We don't know what it's for and who this particular person is?

I was told this declaration was made by Lawyer Eta in Mamfe. James happens to be the private secretary to the GM. I'm sure he is even in the office here. To the best of my knowledge, you can find out from the Commissariat or the Brigade. I'm not aware that James was locked up by anybody or any arrest was ordered for him by anybody.

What I know is that all of us were invited to the Brigade, each person in their own turn to be interrogated on this issue of the death of the GM and this invitation was issued by the Prosecutor, the State Counsel, who invited all of us to the brigade. What I know is that James was the first person who went there because on that day, he said that he would have to travel. So, they said okay - not to disturb him from travelling, let them handle his case first.

When I was going out, because I had bank transactions, I met Chief Itoh, the Board Chairman, sitting there, so I said: why should they keep you waiting? So he said James is inside and he will go in at his own time, and Chief Itoh spent more than five hours there. To say that someone who was being interrogated by the judiciary means that he had been ordered to be detained by the Deputy GM is very ridiculous.

Those declarations, I'll call them irresponsible, because, before someone makes any pronouncements, they should have to verify their facts. If based on what information he was given, may be it is his right to make whatever opinion he had; but James, I'm not sure was arrested by anybody. You can verify.

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Are you also aware that you were accused of ordering for the GM's office to be opened after it had been locked?

I heard that too when we returned from Limbe. When we returned from Limbe, I heard that I asked for the General Manager's office to be opened. On the contrary, when I was told that the forces of law and order and the judiciary were here to seal the office, what I told them was: look, you cannot seal the whole office because people have to work. May be you can close the sensitive areas which, to the best of my knowledge, people will put an eye on is the GM's office and that of the Finance Manager, because, that is where everybody's focus is. Let's seal the place for people not to tamper with those offices; documents and others. They said no, they'll have to seal the whole office. I said what for? They insisted and sealed th

e whole office. So, when they sent word that the GM's office should be opened, I said opened for what? Even when he was alive, nobody went to his office when you had nothing to do there. Personally, I did not go to his office when he was not there, because, I had my office and he had his. So, why should I go to his office? More still, all of us were not here, so, I will ask his office to be opened for what purpose?

(Enter Charles Nkiambue): Early in the morning, I realised that the forces of law and order were already around to seal the place. I decided not to move, since I knew that all top Managers had left and I was the only top Manager left in place, I decided to remain and find out and see what was actually happening.

I actually followed them up to head office and then got information from them, their mission and they told me they were sealing only sensitive areas and that is when I now went down to the factory and then told the factory people that the forces of law and order insisted that they are sealing only sensitive areas which is head office and that is how the head office workers went off that day and I went to the factory and told the workers that they could continue with work, even though work did not continue that day because the morale was too low.

The other allegation was that you wanted to transfer your office to Douala?

(Laughs...) It is very ridiculous for people to say that I want to relocate the office from Lobe to Douala. You can see the magnificent structure we are putting up just across the road to accommodate the head office staff.

It beats my imagination for someone to think that we'll leave Lobe. On the contrary, one of the late General Manager's objectives was to close the Douala office because it is a very expensive office. First, it costs us about FCFA 1 million a month to run that office, only for rents and, again, with that vision, we had begun transferring people from that office to Lobe. We want to close the office because it is expensive.

And even if we maintain the office, we'll reduce it to the barest minimum because it is a transit office that will need just about three persons so that people in transit can come, sit there and do some work. We're looking for a new location to move from that structure to a cheaper one. PAMOL head office cannot leave Lobe for Douala. There is no rationale in that.

You talked about the magnificent structure under construction; how long will it take you to relocate to this new building in Lobe?

It has been our intention, not up to a year ago, to move into the office. We've been hindered by finances. We've been unable to finish the building because we have a lot of priorities. We thought that the government will come in, just as someone mentioned here, with the funding so that we can carry out our projects. But the money we had, which ought to have gone to this building, we're using it to pay our debts. So, our attention was now shifted from there to those areas.

Right now, we're thinking that even if the building is not completed, if we can make it habitable, we'll move in and inside, we'll complete it. We want to paint the inside and get about two toilets functional, then we'll move in. This place is too tight for everybody. We'll move in and inside there, we'll be working gradually. If we say we'll wait till that building is completed, it will take us about two years, by the present state in which we are.

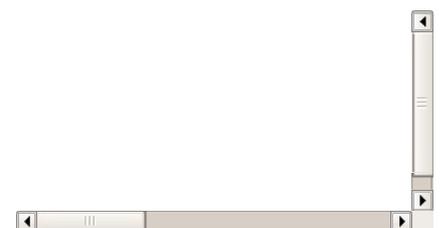
What was your personal working relationship with the late General Manager?

I think that we had as General Manager someone who was quite friendly with everybody socially. Work wise, we worked in harmony. To the best of my knowledge, he had no squabble with anybody that I know. I think that everybody will testify that we worked with him professionally very well and had no problems. That is to my knowledge, except others know that he had a grudge with anybody.

What, do you think is the source of these wild allegations, the bitterness, and this witch-hunting that followed his death?

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The perpetrators of rumours know why they are making those allegations. As far as I know, the workers have a very cordial relationship with management, except those who don't want to work. And we, as a team, to the best of my knowledge, wouldn't work with people who don't want to work.

They are people who think that they are untouchables – that doesn't exist anywhere. This is a State corporation. We are guided by rules and regulations and we who are Managers in this company are called upon to make sure that the rules and regulations are respected, so that the company runs and makes profit to sustain the livelihoods of those who work in it and that of Cameroon.

We pay taxes; we inject lots of money into the project, and the economy of the area will fall if we don't make money and that is precisely what we are fighting to do. We'll not tolerate anyone who doesn't want to work and nobody does. This is a business; this is a corporation and not a philanthropic organisation. So, anybody who doesn't want to work, we'll work without the person and Management is bent on doing that.

We'll forge ahead. This is the legacy. We work as a team. A corporation is not run by an individual; it is run by a team of people. From bottom to top, everybody has their own responsibility and we must, as a team, push the company ahead. We'll not depend on people who think that if they are not there, the company will fall. No!

What strategy do you have to revamp your aging plantations, to cope with the mounting debts and how do you plan to manage the money Government will put at your disposal?

The whole package was FCFA 14.3 billion and the Government has to come in with FCFA 6.6 billion and the rest from PAMOL. So, we think that if the Government respects its engagements, things would be better.

We are agreed that our plantations are very old. We have to replant, to extend the plantations. We have a programme to replant the aging plantations and have begun replanting in Lobe estate – replanting already over 500 hectares. Part of this replanting has been felt, while part is an under planting. We also have extension programmes which we started at Kombo-Nene.

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