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News24 | May 19, 2021

Chinese agreement to build a fishing port in Sierra Leone meets resistance

Posted by [Robinette Girard](#)

Sierra Leone has agreed to sell 250 acres [100 ha] of pristine beach and rainforest to China in a \$ 55 million deal that would see an industrial fishing port built on the site.

The move sparked outrage from [local](#) conservationists, animal and human rights groups and [landowners](#) , who said the project would "destroy virgin rainforest, plunder stocks. of fish, pollute the marine environment and five individual ecosystems which are breeding grounds for fish and support endangered species of birds and wildlife ”.

Details of the deal, first [reported by UK newspaper The Guardian](#) , remain hazy. Local public policy research organizations, the Institute for Legal Research and Justice Advocacy (ILRAJ) and Namati Sierra Leone wrote to the government asking for information on "plans to create a fishing port. and waste management in Black Johnson, in the Western Region Peninsula. , a project funded by the Chinese government. "

The groups are asking for copies of the legally mandated environmental and social impact assessments, as well as the grant agreement between China and the Sierra Leonean government.

The Chinese and Sierra Leonean embassies in London and the Sierra Leone State House were unavailable for comment when contacted by CNBC.

The waters of Black Johnson are rich in fish and local fishermen provide a substantial share of the domestic market. Meanwhile, the Western Zone Peninsula National Park is home to many endangered species.

A [press release from](#) Fisheries and Marine Resources Minister Emma Kowa-Jalloh said on Monday that "the facility to be built is a fishing port and not a fish mill as described by social media editors."

“The objective of Fish Harbor is to centralize all fishing activities. The government of Sierra Leone has been yearning for a Fish Harbor since the early 1970s, but has not been able to achieve it due to the huge amount of money required, ”Kowa- Jalloh said.

“With the new change in government policy for the development of the fishing industry, the Chinese government has granted a grant of US \$ 55 million to build this platform. "

The statement also claimed that Black Johnson was "the most suitable location for the construction of the facility in terms of bathymetry, social guarantees (minimum cost of relocation) and environmental issues."

Kowa-Jalloh said the finance ministry had set aside 13.76 billion leones (about \$ 1.34 million) in compensation for landowners, and insisted the sale of the land was aimed at “Ensure a regular supply of fish” on the local market.

In a tweet on Tuesday, Greenpeace Africa condemned the decision, arguing that "West African fishing communities are already suffering the effects of environmental degradation and the climate crisis".

"Allowing more extractive activities in this region will only make the situation worse," the organization added.

Chinese grant funding

The growth of China's overseas presence in infrastructure and economic development projects in Africa and beyond has been well documented in recent years, but often such initiatives are funded through loan agreements.



The land sold is in Whale Bay, known for its cetaceans and a key breeding ground for fish, according to those who oppose the project. Photograph: Issouf Sanogo / AFP / Getty

Professor Katharine Adeney of the Asian Research Institute at the University of Nottingham noted some apparent similarities between the deal with Sierra Leone, given details currently available, and part of the China-Pakistan economic corridor.

“The majority of CPEC projects in Pakistan have been financed by loans. However, the development of Gwadar Port, Gwadar International Airport and many "heart and soul" projects in the region should be funded by Chinese grants," she said. CNBC Tuesday.

"This reflects the importance of the project's success to China's strategic interest (the only other project funded by a grant was the development of fiber-optic cable from China to Pakistan, essential for the development of the Beidou satellite system.). "

Adeney noted that this could also be the case here, although Sierra Leone is not in the maritime “belt” of the China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the global infrastructure development strategy adopted. by Beijing in 2013.

The Gwadar project in Pakistan has also faced stiff opposition from local fishermen displaced by the project, while concerns have been raised as to whether the local workforce will be able to benefit from the project in the event of a loss. sudden influx of workers from elsewhere in Pakistan or abroad.

“The development of Gwadar includes many projects of heart and mind on paper (eg developing a training center, expanding a hospital), but very few of them have come to fruition yet. . The whole area has been strongly secured,” he added. Adeney explained.

Parliamentary inquiry and constitutional challenge

Local activists in Sierra Leone have denounced the government's lack of transparency in recent days as they sought to clarify the nature of the project. Robert Besseling, CEO of political risk consultancy Pangea-Risk, told CNBC on Tuesday that the opacity of the deal could end up "derailing" or at least provoking further resistance.

“First, there is a lack of transparency on the Sierra Leonean government's land capital and the Chinese cash grant agreement, which raises concerns about potential corruption and could subject it to parliamentary inquiry,” a- he declared.

“Second, any forced displacement of residents around the project site could be made unconstitutional based on current tenure rights provisions. "

Besseling noted that the fisheries deal deviated from the government's previous reluctance to deal with Chinese counterparts. Shortly after taking office in April 2018, President Julius Maada Bio canceled several high-profile contracts, including a \$ 400 million airport construction contract backed by a Chinese loan.

The government argued at the time that there was no business case for the new airport outside the capital Freetown, and instead promised to renovate its existing airport.

"The lack of funding opportunities during the pandemic may indicate that Sierra Leone is increasingly returning to China's sphere of influence and is now seeking more Chinese loans for development and infrastructure projects," he said. added Besseling.

Original source: [News24](#)

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