

Liberia: Villagers, SRC at loggerheads over land
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Villagers, SRC at loggerheads over land

By Joaquin M. Sendolo

David Sumo is over 75 years old now and has lost his sight. He lives with his children and grandchildren in the Monkey Tail Village in Margibi County in the operational confines of the Salala Rubber Corporation (SRC).

He, like all other family heads of the villages surrounding this plantation, depends on the land available to them to make farms to earn a living. But the presence of SRC especially in recent times of its expansion has left Sumo and families without hope of making farm as the company has allegedly encroached on their land and claimed a greater portion of it.

“We are suffering here. Monkey Tail Village is not our village; the company drove us from our own village and the person who opened this village allowed us to be here,” Sumo said, adding, “We want our land back because the company is of no help to us; after getting our land, it cannot employ our children to tap rubber or slash grass but leave us out in everything.”

There are about 22 impoverished villages of over 2,000 inhabitants surrounding SRC with this experience, and all are contending that the company turns over their land of inheritance, which it claimed without their consent years ago.

Sumo recalls that the company has been operating in their area since 1962, but the only experience they have had from time to time is to expand into their land, destroy their sacred places and tree crops, and relocate them from village to village as it is with them in the Monkey Tail Village.

“We pay for medical bills when we want to be treated at the company’s health facility; our children are allowed in school here only when we pay their fees, and our boy-children here are left out of the jobs provided by the company. What is it can we boast of as owners of the land that the SRC planted rubber on? We need our land back because SRC is of no help for us,” Sumo said.

Jerry Vuku, 41 years old, claims that despite as young men in the village, SRC does not employ them but brings workers from other areas. “The company is taking our land, but it does not regard us in its employment scheme. We are marginalized by the company and, as it is with us, we have no land to farm on now because all the land has been taken from us by the company,” said Vuku.

Hawa Flomo, a mother of four, claims that SRC has taken over their land of inheritance that they have nowhere to make farm. “Where we have now to make farm is the swamp, because the company has taken over all of the land. It cannot employ us and there is nothing it can do to make us feel that it is occupying our land. Let them give our land back because we are suffering and nothing we get from it,” Hawa said.

Moses K. Yiah, Town Chief of Dokaita, is calling for human rights advocates to come to their aid because, according to him, the company does not regard them as inhabitants of the land. “We sit and see people brushing and planting rubber, and when we ask, they tell us to leave and go elsewhere because the company has taken over the area we are. This has been going on since 2001 and villages we were before have left on the plantation of SRC. We are suffering here and need our land back,” said Yiah.

Yiah said the company uses divide and rule method now because of the persistent advocacy they are carrying on now. “SRC has given jobs to some of our brothers and they always countering our protest against the land grab the company is carrying on.”

Kwitaa George, head of women’s group in Dokaita, says SRC does not regard them as people who need to live as evidenced by its refusal to provide contract or employment for them. “Even farm brushing and rubber tapping are given different people and our husbands are here. For the women, until a big man loves to you

before they can give you a contract here. It happened to my sister (name withheld) and she can share her experience better, said Kwitaa.

Jerry Sengbe Baryogar, an elder in Dokaita, explained that SRC's presence in their village is dated back in the late 1950s. According to Baryogar, there was no consultation with inhabitants of the area about the coming of the company but saw government officials and representatives of the company giving order for people to vacate the portion of land being given the company.

"But we saw the company coming in again some years ago taking our land without any word to us or how it got the right to come in. We don't understand why it is doing this, and all that it is doing for which we do not have enough land to make farm on, it cannot give us employment opportunities to help us send our children to school," he said.

He added that the company without any proof goes ahead to implicate young men of the villages surrounding the plantation of stealing rubber, and men who are working there will sometimes grab and beat those that they implicate.

According to reports, some men loyal to the company attacked local activists and Green Advocate in recent times and scores of the activists have left their villages for unknown locations to seek safety, and Green Advocate has filed the case to the Weala Magisterial Court.

When contacted, Jallah Mensah, Human Resource Manager of Salala Rubber Company, said he cannot make any comment now because he is on vacation. "I cannot say anything about that because I am on vacation, and if I comment now, it means I am working."

Salala Rubber Corporation along with the Liberia Agriculture Company (LAC) was granted concession in 1959. It was again acquired by Socfin in 2007, and since taking over there has been conflict between it and the local villagers over its expansion. Socfin is a group of powerful agro-industrial conglomerate and it is listed on the Luxembourg.

The land conflict in Margibi and Bong Counties involving villagers and SRC has led 22 villagers to file a complaint to the International Finance Corporation (IFC) Compliant Advisor Ombudsman (CAO). The IFC has granted US\$10 million loan for the expansion of the company but with a condition that any act of expansion should be characterized by Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) of the people, something that the SRC according to the villagers has fallen short of in their complaint.

An assessment team that visited the plantation earlier solicited views from the both parties, and the company during the hearing resisted the allegations and argued that "Deeds or tribal certificates of land within the development area dated after 1959 when the concession agreement was signed are ineffectual under Liberian Law because the Concession Agreement supersedes any subsequent grants to the title."

The Company told the assessment team that although notice was received from individuals and groups, claiming land within the Development Area, none of the deeds from the claims received pre-dated 1959, and no original documents were provided to verify the authenticity of the Registration Numbers with the Land Commission.

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