



'We want our land back': Liberian communities speak out about big palm oil

Published: 10 Aug 2015

Short URL: <http://farmlandgrab.org/25219>

Posted in: [EPO](#) | [Golden Agri](#) | [Liberia](#) | [Sime Darby](#)

[Comments \(0\)](#) [Print](#) [Email this](#)

Mongabay | 10 August 2015

'We want our land back': Liberian communities speak out about big palm oil

by Sara Jerving

Some communities are eager to participate Liberia's expanding palm oil industry, while others say their land was taken from them without their permission.

- Palm oil plantations are expanding in Liberia.
- Some communities allege their land was used to grow oil palm without their consent.
- Property ownership in Liberia is a tricky issue; reforms are underway to clarify and strengthen land rights.



Equatorial Palm Oil, which is publicly-listed in the UK, has an office in Grand Bassa County, located in central Liberia, near its expansive palm oil concessions. The concessions last for 50 years. Photo by Sara Jerving.

Sleeping families in Grand Bassa County, in the heart of central Liberia, awoke one night in September 2013 to the sound of security forces storming through their villages, blaring sirens and flashing lights. These rural villages, consisting of mud homes with thatched roofs, are not used to outside visitors at night. They had not had nighttime visits from security vehicles since the war ended a decade ago. For those who lived through the 14-year war, the fear of security forces remains raw. For many, this unannounced nocturnal visit brought back memories of the nightmarish lawlessness of the war, when the sight of armed men could signal rape, murder and the abduction of children to enlist as child soldiers. That night, many from the community fled into the forest in fear and spent the night in hiding.

The next morning, some villagers went into town to learn what happened during the night. They brought back with them the local newspaper, which reported that government police had come to the area to escort Equatorial Palm Oil surveyors. Palm oil is produced by pressing the fruit of oil palm trees, and is used worldwide in many products, including cosmetics, soaps, candy and biofuels. Equatorial Palm Oil, a UK-publicly listed company, was invited to Liberia by the government as part of efforts to expand its palm oil sector and ultimately supply multinational companies such as Unilever and Nestlé, as well as regional markets.

The company had spent recent months clearing the forests on the land on which the community had been living for generations, and which is their primary source of livelihood. This happened without their consultation, according to community members interviewed by Mongabay. However, EPO told Mongabay that before the company works on any undeveloped area, it always has dialogue with the communities in which it operates.

The company was about to move forth with a survey of the rest of the land, which many of the community members opposed because they already made the decision that they had no more land to give the company. To those in the villages, the night visit seemed to be a strategy intended to intimidate them into submission to allow the survey.

After that night, some of the villagers decided to present a petition to the Grand Bassa County supervisor, asking that the survey be prevented. They set out on the dirt road through the palm nurseries, which led to the main roads to the nearest city, Buchanan. Community members dressed themselves entirely in white, some placing white handkerchiefs in their pockets - intended to symbolize that their march was peaceful.

The villagers of Grand Bassa County didn't make it far before they were met by the government's riot troops. When they continued marching, some of them were beaten with sticks and hurled to the

The **Declaration of the Global Convergence of Land and Water Struggles** launched in Dakar at the African Social Forum in October 2014 and reworked in Tunis at the World Social Forum in March 2015 is open for signature and engagement.

Who's involved?

Select Category

Posts

Comments

Recent posts

Oil palm plantations in Colombia expand into indigenous territory

11 Aug 2015 | No Comments

Canada: Farmers' organizations want clearer rules on farmland ownership in provinces

11 Aug 2015 | No Comments

'We want our land back': Liberian communities speak out about big palm oil

10 Aug 2015 | No Comments

Australia: Canada cracks almond deal

10 Aug 2015 | No Comments

Projeto agrícola financiado pelo Brasil atrai acusações em Moçambique

10 Aug 2015 | No Comments

Un collectif de l'opposition dénonce le bradage du foncier en Mauritanie

09 Aug 2015 | No Comments

Relaunching destruction in Papua monoculture agriculture project threatens indigenous lands and livelihoods

08 Aug 2015 | No Comments

La aspereza del aceite de palma

08 Aug 2015 | No Comments

Small farmers could buy "up to 20ha of state-owned land"

07 Aug 2015 | No Comments

Argentina: Acaparamiento de tierras y bienes comunes

07 Aug 2015 | No Comments

[more](#)

Languages

[Amharic](#) [Bahasa Indonesia](#) [Català](#) [Catala](#) [Dansk](#)

not troops. When they concluded marching, some of them were beaten with sticks and hurled to the ground; the crowd was sprayed with tear gas. About a dozen were then lifted into a truck and driven to Buchanan. They were eventually released without charge. The County Attorney found no grounds to justify their detention.

A spokesperson for the police confirmed sending their riot unit to confront and arrest some of the marchers, alleging that the marchers were threatening palm oil company property and the lives of its staffers. Four of the villagers involved in the conflict were hospitalized after the assault, according to community members interviewed. The community members maintained that their march was peaceful.

A few months later, in what might have seemed like a million miles away from rural Liberia, government ministers met in the capital city of Monrovia for a Christmas tree-lighting ceremony a week before the holidays. The gate of the executive mansion was decorated with about 25 palm leaves, spray-painted silver with red ornaments. Shade trees were mechanized to serenade the president's guests to "Santa Claus is Coming to Town." Patriotic red, white and blue holiday lights dangled across the streets in homage to the Liberian flag, which is nearly identical to the American flag, designed by its founding settlers.

President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf lit three official trees at government buildings that night, and implored Liberians to commit "to working together for the good of the country." Ministers gathered over a buffet meal of finger sandwiches, cookies, meat and spicy rice.

A write-up of the holiday gathering was buried on the seventh page of one of the local newspapers, Front Page Africa, the Friday after the lighting ceremonies. But the front page gave a more realistic reflection on the tensions that have been building up in rural Liberia. Highlighted was a photograph of a batch of red palm oil fruit, alongside the headline "**Intimidating Villagers': UK's Equatorial Palm Oil Accused of Human Rights Abuses in Liberia**" and a story detailing the confrontations between EPO and the villagers in Grand Bassa County. The article was written by international advocacy organization Global Witness, which had accused EPO of human rights abuses, finding that the company's "security personnel and members of the elite Liberian Police Support Unit (PSU) assaulted and arrested unarmed civilians." The company denied the allegations, but admitted to providing logistical support to the Liberian police. This confrontation in the heart of this West African nation was several years in the making and would shine light on the real cost of the palm oil expansion in Liberia.

Liberia is a nation founded by the descendants of freed American slaves in 1847 — making it the oldest republic in Africa. The settlers were a minority in the country, but animosity arose soon after their arrival over what was perceived as their dominance in politics, the economy and land ownership. These tensions over the preferential treatment of the so-called "Americo-Liberians" continued to broil for over a century until the leadership was overthrown in a military coup in 1980, culminating into instability that led the nation into two civil wars that took the lives of 250,000 and displaced 1.3 million. The wars also decimated what little infrastructure the nation had.

In the years following the peace accords in 2003 and the nation's elections, a "Poverty Reduction Strategy" aimed at attracting long-term direct foreign investment was adopted. The policy, aimed at rebuilding the war-torn nation, states that such investment would "accrue to the nation as a whole and not to just a few."

By some measures, that policy worked. Investments, including in the palm oil sector, have come in at such a rapid pace that the country has since been noted as having one of the highest ratios of direct foreign investment to gross domestic product in the world, **according to the World Bank**. That is tempered, though, by the fact that the GDP of Liberia, which has a population of 4.3 million, is minuscule. It sunk to just over \$130 million during the war and rose to \$1.95 billion in 2013. In comparison, the U.S. state of Kentucky has a similar population size and a GDP of \$154 billion.

As part of its efforts to improve Liberia's economy, the government invited foreign palm oil companies into the country - hoping to develop the vast amounts of land that were subject to **rampant illegal logging** during the nation's wars, but not developed in a formalized way. Liberia's forests are a combination of primary and secondary forests because of this history. These companies will reportedly pay a series of taxes and leases to the country as the palm plants develop. One of the companies, Golden Veroleum Liberia (GVL), will be paying about \$2 per acre, per year, for the land that they use. When the palm plants start producing.

For some communities, living among big industry is nothing new. Some of the land that has been turned over to the companies already surrounds old plantations. BF Goodrich and Guthrie had rubber plantations that have since been turned over to palm oil producer Sime Darby. But the government has leased out land to the companies beyond the former plantation boundaries, resulting in encroachment on villages. This is happening across the country. Some community members argue that the previous companies, such as those operating rubber plantations, brought no economic benefits to the area—with people often still living in rudimentary housing and dependent on the forests around them for survival.

Some companies, such as Sime Darby, have provided compensation to local people for some of the crops destroyed for palm oil expansion, plus other forms of



[Deutsch](#) [English](#) [Español](#)
[français](#) [Italiano](#) [Kurdish](#)
[Malagasy](#) [Nederlands](#)
[Português](#) [Suomi](#)
[Svenska](#) [Türkçe](#) [العربي](#) 🗺

Special content

[🔊 audio](#) [📄 contracts](#)
[🗺 off-topic](#) [👥 video](#) [💧 water](#)
[📰 wikileaks](#) [♀️ women](#)

Archives

Select month ⌵

development such as water pumps and roads. A community in Bomi County, in western Liberia, is eager to offer the company more of their land after a road was built for them, connecting them with surrounding villages and local markets. Other residents are still waiting for compensation. And for some, the land that has been taken from them cannot easily be priced.



Palm oil companies in Liberia have obtained large plots of land through concession agreements with the government. Sime Darby is clearing trees to make way for palm plants. Photo by Sara Jerving.

“We want our land back,” said Bindu Kannea, a mother and a farmer who lives in the neighboring Grand Cape Mount County. “We the women, we only want the land. They are not employing us.”

Rebuilding Liberia is not an easy task for the government. After years of conflict, land deeds are scarce and feelings of marginalization are deeply engrained in the mindset of society.

Traditionally, the people of Liberia never sold land. It was shared communally. Communities granted the rights to use land to its members. But when the settlers from America came to Liberia, they introduced the Western notion of property ownership, and with this, tensions grew.

“Land is power, as we always say in the Liberian context. If you have land, you are a big man. You are a powerful man,” said Stanley Nimley Toe, senior program officer of the Liberian Land Commission.

The settlers declared “customary land” — land held by communities — as public land when they arrived. According to Liberian law, those who possess customary land can use it but do not own it. In the case of palm oil concessions, community members are entitled to crop compensation for one year’s worth of crops on the land they had been farming, but not payment for the actual land. The government exercises its eminent domain function to grant companies concessions on customary land, despite the fact that communities are living, and often farming, on this same land.

Often, the land is not properly surveyed before concessions are granted. Even if it were, less than 20 percent of Liberia’s land has a title attached to it. Weak land laws, coupled with the return of displaced Liberians to their homeland after the civil war, has been a recipe for mass confusion and contention.

“The issue of concessions has been of serious concern because of the process involved in awarding concessions has not been transparent,” Nimley Toe said. “If customary people were brought in from the beginning, then the old land use issues could be settled. Companies would not have the problems that they are faced with right now.”

To exacerbate this, everybody’s in a hurry, he said. “In the rush to have revenues generated, the government brings in these companies and sometimes procedures are not followed.” Liberia’s land commission, established in 2009, has been tasked with reconciling some of the issues relating to land ownership. The commission has been working on equating customary land rights with private land rights, so that communities with “use rights” to land would have the same rights as landowners. These changes would be considered “revolutionary” in Liberia, according to Nimley Toe.

However, even if these changes are made, they may not be completely restorative. The new land ownership laws, as they are written now, will not be retroactive and will offer no benefits for communities living on land already allocated to companies. This is one of the areas of concern that civil society is hoping to address in the drafting of the law because some of the concessions were granted to the companies for a period of 65 years, Nimley Toe said.

Palm oil companies aren’t pleased with the liquid status of land ownership in Liberia, either. When asked what the top challenges of operating in Liberia are, Virgil Magee, head of communications for GVL said “Land, land, and land. Those are the top three challenges.”

Land issues are particularly sensitive in a post-conflict nation like Liberia. According to the United Nations Mission in Liberia, “access to, control over, and ownership of land were at the heart of the conflict and remain sources of contention and insecurity.” The UN’s Panel of Experts on Liberia concluded in November 2013 that it “remains concerned that large-scale palm oil development continues to pose significant challenges to peace and security in rural areas.”

The major companies that operate in Liberia are members of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil. In order to be a member of this international multi-stakeholder non-profit group, companies must obtain “free, prior and informed consent” from communities in which they hope to obtain land. However, watchdog groups have alleged that these procedures have not always been followed.

In July, Global Witness accused GVL of accelerating its operations at the peak of Liberia’s Ebola crisis that killed more than 4,800 people. The [report](#) said that during that time, the company was “holding meetings with hundreds of people and encouraging illiterate citizens to sign away their land rights when community support groups were staying home for risk of contagion. At this time GVL almost doubled the size of its plantation.” The company has denied wrongdoing and said that its actions during that time were part of its long-term plans.

To Kpanan’Ayoung Siakor, of the Sustainable Development Institute, community resistance to palm oil

expansion in Liberia is not about palm oil and it's not a rejection of production companies from Liberia. It's about communities protecting their last remaining pieces of land.

Source: [Mongabay](#)

Post a comment

Name

Email address (optional - if you want a reply)

Comment



Submit

Links (resistance and actions)

- [Act Now! for a better PNG](#)
- [Afrique-Europe-Interact](#)
- [Alliance paysanne « Stop aux accaparements des terres »](#)
- [Asian Peasant Coalition](#)
- [awasMIFEE!](#)
- [Cameroon Veritas](#)
- [Clean sugar campaign \(Cambodia\)](#)
- [CNOP](#)
- [Coalición contra el Acaparamiento - Colombia](#)
- [Collectif NOPALME](#)
- [Collectif pour la Défense des Terres du Ndiael](#)
- [Collectif pour la Défense des Terres Malgaches](#)
- [Dakar Appeal | Llamamiento de Dakar | Appel de Dakar](#)
- [Et maintenant, nos terres](#)
- [FIAN](#)
- [Friends of Yala Swamp](#)
- [Gardarem la terre et la mer](#)
- [Global Land Grabbing II](#)
- [Green Scenery](#)
- [Infos acquisitions terres Afrique](#)
- [La Via Campesina](#)

- **Land Inc.**
- **Land Justice for West Africa**
- **Le Hub Rural**
- **MILDA**
- **No land no food no life**
- **Oakland Institute**
- **openlandcontracts.org**
- **Our land our business**
- **PANAP**
- **Paren aquí vive gente**
- **PCSF**
- **Plateforme pour une agriculture socialement durable**
- **Projet ReAct**
- **Re:Common**
- **SiLNoRF**
- **Stop Africa Land Grab**
- **STOP Land Grabbing**
- **Synergie Paysanne**
- **Thorané: the land issue in Cambodia**
- **World Rainforest Movement**
- **Zamana**
-