



Riot on the plantation

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Riot on the plantation

By Elaisha Stokes in Sinoe county, Liberia

Photos by Kuni Takahashi for Al Jazeera America

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Liberian police search a village near a palm tree nursery at Golden Veroleum Liberia in Butaw, Liberia, on May 27, after a riot allegedly caused by villagers.

On the morning of May 24, a rumor started to circulate around Butaw district. The CEO of Golden Veroleum Liberia, the palm oil company that had become the lifeblood of the local villages, was going to visit. It was a big deal. When the roads are good, Butaw is a six-hour drive from the country's capital, Monrovia. But the roads are rarely good, and dignitaries seldom visit.

When the company planted its first oil palm seedlings in 2010, villagers hoped they might find employment with the company. But for most the jobs didn't materialize. People remained unemployed and terribly poor. They were farmers by trade, but farmland had become scarce since the company came to town. Now villagers had no land and no jobs, and they were angry. The view through a battered windshield the day after the riot, top. Liberian police muster in Butaw, left. Chinese peacekeepers from the United Nations were called in to the village to help restore calm. (Click to enlarge images)

The Butaw Youth Association saw an opportunity. They wrote the CEO a letter requesting a meeting "to please address our plight," referring to the land dispute between the people of Butaw and Golden Veroleum Liberia, or GVL. "Your failure to hold this meeting with us," the letter continued, will have consequences.

On May 26, senior GVL representatives arrived in Butaw for the meeting. (The company will not confirm their names.) What happened next is of some dispute. According to the company, earlier that morning, 30 to 40 men blocked workers from entering the plantation. As the demonstration swelled, witnesses say, hundreds of young men and women wielding rocks and sticks ran through the property. The deputy minister of internal affairs, who had previously mediated conflicts between the Butaw people and the company, was flown in on a private GVL plane. A police contingent sent to restore calm was quickly overrun.

'Each time I talk, I cough blood. I urinate blood.'

—Christopher Nyendeh, who was badly beaten in the riot

The rioters stormed the mess hall. A group of young men surrounded a Land Rover and pulled the driver out. They beat him within an inch of his life. Video taken less than 24 hours after the incident shows the man, Christopher Nyendeh, with a face swollen beyond recognition. "Each time I talk, I cough blood," he says through his broken jaw. "I urinate blood."

Varney Sirleaf, the deputy minister, was quickly smuggled away in the trunk of another vehicle. A plantation manager from South Africa was taken hostage. The United Nations Mission in Liberia dispatched two platoons of Chinese peacekeepers to negotiate his release. Two contingents of Nigerian peacekeepers arrived by helicopter to help disperse the crowds.

By nightfall, the ransacked mess hall was emptied of both its foreign staff, which had been evacuated to Monrovia, and all of their belongings, which had been stolen. Computers, power saws, motobikes, bed sheets — everything was taken. At least six SUVs had their windows blown out. Shards of broken glass and grains of rice were strewn across the lawns. The search and seizure warrant, issued the next day, listed the cost of damage as \$736,509.58.

The plantation's operations were shut down and the grounds completely evacuated, save for a few

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staff to keep watch. For the first time since the oil palm seedlings were sown, the plantation was quiet.

Naturally grown palm seeds in Liberia. (Click to enlarge images)

In Liberia, the unrest in Butaw is just the latest episode in a series of recent land disputes that have turned violent. The small West African nation does not have large deposits of minerals and it has been slow to exploit its oil reserves. Instead, it has land, which multinational companies have been eager to acquire. The government has promised at least 520,000 hectares of land — close to five percent of the country — to the top four palm oil companies in Liberia. These investments will bring development to the rural regions, the government says. GVL alone plans to invest \$1.6 billion in the development of its palm oil plantations.

But the over 70 percent of Liberians who depend on agriculture for their livelihood are less convinced. Reluctant to hand over their land for uncertain gain, many villages have descended into violence. In 2009, the United Nations Mission in Liberia identified land and property conflict as a serious threat to the country's peace and development. The government has since encouraged concession holders to negotiate directly with villagers to expand their plantations. It has created a David and Goliath scenario, with high stakes for all parties.

The quest for sustainable palm oil

Palm oil is a ubiquitous component of modern life. It can be found in candy bars and dish soap, lipstick and instant noodles. Most of the world's supply comes from the red fruit of the stocky African oil palm tree, *Elaeis guineensis*. A healthy tree can produce a single yield of bright red, plum-sized fruit that together can weigh hundreds of pounds. A hectare of palm trees can produce as much as eight tons of oil.

While the African oil palm is native to West Africa, the largest producer of palm oil since 2007 has been Indonesia, with Malaysia coming a close second. According to the Indonesian Ministry of Agriculture, 8 million hectares of oil palm trees are currently under cultivation in the country, twice as many as in 2000. Last year, the country was expected to produce 33.5 million tons of palm oil.

Oil palm trees need consistently high temperatures and humidity to bear fruit, making a rain forest climate ideal for their growth. The World Wildlife Fund estimates that from 1990 to 2010, about one-third of the land planted with oil palm was land that had been cleared of virgin rain forest. Palm oil is blamed with placing the orangutan on the endangered species list, evicting indigenous communities from their land and releasing enormous quantities of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

A palm tree nursery operated by Golden Veroleum Liberia in Butaw. (Click to enlarge images)

By the mid-'90s, environmental groups were lobbying the world's major palm oil purchasers, such as Kraft and Nestlé, to start using ethically sourced palm oil. In 2004, the palm oil industry responded by creating the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, or RSPO — a voluntary group of growers, processors and nonprofits that certifies the production of palm oil to make sure it is a sustainable crop. Much in the same way that farmers have their crops certified as organic, palm oil growers could now declare that their oil had been ethically produced.

But the certification process proved slow and cumbersome. New rules had to be developed and then adopted by the industry. Certifying oil palm as ethical is costly, and many producers were reluctant to adopt the standards.

In 2008, Greenpeace sent eight activists in orangutan suits to climb up the side of the corporate offices of Unilever, one of the world's largest purchasers of palm oil. The move prompted the company to commit to purchasing only RSPO-certified palm oil (though previously, Greenpeace had released a report accusing the RSPO of being little more than a mouthpiece for the palm oil industry). Soon after, other large companies such as Procter & Gamble and Nestlé followed suit. Demand for "certified sustainable palm oil," or CSPO, continued to grow. Last year, for the first time since the RSPO was founded, demand for certified palm oil grew faster than the supply could be produced.

To obtain certification, palm oil producers must adhere to the RSPO's principles, chief among them the stipulation that oil palm cannot be planted in a virgin rain forest. For companies that hoped to expand their plantation holdings, this posed a problem. Most of the land in Indonesia and Malaysia that might have qualified under these new regulations had already been planted. Fortunately, across the ocean, there was a tiny African country whose recently elected president was desperately courting investment after more than a decade of civil war — which had already destroyed most of the virgin forests. Best of all, the oil palm trees were indigenous to the region, promising the perfect climate for profit expansion.

"There is a lot of interest in Liberia because a lot of people think that West Africa is the next frontier for palm oil," explains Ravin Krishnan, the complaints coordinator for the RSPO. "It's like the wild west."

Liberia, the wild west of oil palm

Liberia, with a population of roughly 4 million, is slightly larger than the state of Tennessee. Historically, all land in the republic that was not privately owned belonged to the government. Farmland was held under customary tenure. There were no titles to demarcate boundaries; instead, villagers relied on the slope of a hill or a bend in the river to tell them where their farm stopped and

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the next began. But such informal limits were of little concern to bureaucrats in Monrovia — without a deed, this land was public and could be used, and sold, by the government as it saw fit.

And so for much of the nation's history the land was parceled and leased to large companies that sought riches in the fertile soil. Entire villages were evicted so that the earth might be mined or the trees could be chopped. When interest in palm oil rose in the 1960s, the country was already home to the world's largest rubber plantation, owned by Firestone. For investors, oil palm seemed a natural progression.

In 1989, Liberia descended into civil war. Most commercial plantations were abandoned. Villagers fled their homes for forests that might hide them from armed combatants, who roamed the countryside. When a peace deal was finally reached in 2003, most of the country's infrastructure had been destroyed. After Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was elected president in 2006, she began an ambitious campaign to woo foreign investors.

A view of Butaw, left. A sign guides visitors to the Golden Veroleum Liberia nursery. (Click to enlarge images)

Oil palm concessions quickly leased for fixed terms with an annual tax. GVL holds 220,000 hectares, roughly the size of Tokyo, for an initial term of 65 years. To date, the company has planted roughly 10,000 hectares with oil palm trees. GVL's nursery currently has 3 million seedlings waiting to be planted.

For using the land, Golden Veroleum must pay the community development fund and the government \$5 each for every hectare it plants. It must also provide \$1.25 to the government for each hectare that is not developed for the first 10 years and \$2.50 per hectare for the remainder of the agreement. While these prices may seem low, they are in line with industry standards across the region. Other conditions of the agreement include development of the community through education initiatives and programs that allow villagers to sell their own palm oil to GVL.

But such development initiatives cannot begin until the plantation starts producing palm oil, a process that can take some time. In the interim, villagers have watched their water sources become polluted from improper land excavation and their farms bulldozed without consent. In villages I visited across the country, the sale of people's land was viewed as a land grab by their government. In many communities, these land conflicts turned hostile.

"In awarding a contract, mistakes were made," says Walter Wisner, the current vice chair of the Land Commission, a government agency that was created to address the issue of ownership. "There was no consultation with local people. It was a tacit omission by the government that the customary people own the land."

The government has since slowed its enforcement of concession agreements, instead instructing companies to resolve land claims with communities directly, and resolution has become another requirement for RSPO certification. But the settling of claims has been slow, and industry insiders say the deadlock could have repercussions.

Prior to the riot, local leaders were scheduled to walk the boundaries of their land with GVL staff to determine where the company might plant its seedlings next. There was incentive to find a resolution: The community members desperately wanted the jobs that an expansion could bring, and GVL had 3 million seedlings ready to be sown. But after the riot, that meeting was postponed.

Benedict Manewah, 48, hid in the bush to avoid police after the riot. (Click to enlarge images)

The morning after

When I arrived the morning after the riot, Butaw district was without men. Almost all of them had fled.

Benedict Manewah stood bleary eyed and nervous at the edge of the forest, where he had spent the last several nights sleeping in the rain. Manewah, 48, was born and raised in Butaw. He is frail from years tending cassava fields to feed his family. Today, he says, he doesn't have any land left to farm. His ancestors' land is now filled with stands of juvenile oil palm trees.

When GVL came to Butaw, Manewah was elected to speak for A-Bloteh, the group that represents the Butaw people in negotiations with the company. Most of those discussions have been around the issue of land. The community must decide which parcels it is willing to cede and negotiate the payment — financial or otherwise — it will receive in return.

According to Manewah, the night after the riot, police flooded into the villages of Butaw. Most police officers in Liberia are not permitted to carry guns. One exception to this rule is the elite Police Support Unit, or PSU. The team is filled with hulking men in full body armor who carry semi-automatic rifles. These were the units that were sent to Butaw.

Manewah was lying in bed with his wife, he says, when noise erupted in the village. He peered through his window to see heavily armed police busting through doors and arresting men. Manewah and his wife dashed for the edge of the forest. They hiked for more than an hour until he was sure that no one would find them. "I know the forest," he says. "I grew up here."

Manewah is adamant that he likes Golden Veroleum. He is adamant that every person in Butaw likes

the company. GVL, he says, has brought jobs for the people and education for their children. But Manewah does not like sleeping in the forest.

"It reminds us of the war," he says, remembering the long periods when villagers had to flee to the forest for refuge from invading rebel armies. "We are really suffering."

Liberian police stand over bags of rice they found, which they believed to have been looted from the palm tree nursery. (Click to enlarge images)

Read the writ of arrest. (Click to enlarge images)

At the plantation, the quiet of the previous evening is replaced with chaos from police operations. When the PSU rolls out, the officers sit in the back of trucks marked with the company logo. The police are accompanied by GVL's "acting management," a group of six young men who have been left in charge now that the foreigners have fled. They are not supervising the search, they say, but acting as "witnesses."

A writ of arrest allows the police to enter people's homes. On the document is a list of items that have been allegedly stolen from the plantation and the names of the accused. Manewah's is among them.

The police sweep the villages in tandem with the GVL staff, entering mud huts and riffling through the personal objects of strangers. Ishmael, who the company has left in charge, and who refuses to give his last name, says the men are simply searching for what was taken. In the back of someone's yard, a bag of rice is found. "This is company rice," Ishmael says. "Evidence." Many of the villagers in Butaw receive monthly rice rations from the company, and so it is harder to prove whether that rice was stolen in the riot or simply given to the alleged thief. "I know it's been stolen," says Ishmael, "because the bag is too full." The PSU officer standing next to him leans in. "You need to call the company" and ask for money, he whispers. "We need small-small. We need informants. This is how we will flush out the people hiding in the bushes."

The rules of engagement

Golden Veroleum Liberia is a member of the RSPO, but its palm oil is not yet certified. That likely won't happen until 2016, when production will truly begin. To date, the company's activities have focused on negotiating for land and planting seedlings. But to obtain certification, the company must practice "free prior informed consent," which means that it cannot coerce communities during negotiations. When conflict arises, complaints are made to the RSPO, and the two parties must enter a process of resolution.

On October 1, 2012, the people of Butaw filed their first RSPO complaint against GVL. The letter stated that the company had "forcefully taken away our customary land" and detailed incidents of harassment and eviction. It said the company had destroyed local burial grounds and contaminated the drinking water. The complaint was written and filed by a local law firm, Green Advocates, with Alfred Brownell acting as lead counsel.

The RSPO found that the Butaw claims had merit, so GVL hired independent environmental consultants from The Forest Trust to assess its operations. After a year, the trust found that GVL staff had a "genuine" desire to improve and that many of the issues had been resolved.

When the unrest began, RSPO's Krishnan started to receive emails. Alwi Hafiz, GVL's sustainability adviser, wrote that in Butaw, the "facilities have been attacked by a mob with cutlasses and rocks." Shortly after, Brownell emailed that there were "unconfirmed reports of serious injuries, mass arrests, detentions" in Butaw and asked, "Is it also true that Golden Veroleum is facilitating reinforcement of police elite units?"

Naturally grown palm seeds on the vine after harvest, left. Adolescent plants at the Golden Veroleum Liberia nursery, right. (Click to enlarge images)

What followed next was a series of accusations, each more bizarre than the one before. A group called the Citizens of Butaw Residing in Monrovia issued a statement that said arrested villagers had "revealed tales of torture." The next day, a man named Dennis Jabbah, a self-described community representative, wrote that the riot had in fact been masterminded by Brownell himself, who had not visited the community in over a year. The Butaw Welfare and Development Association, or BWDA, responded that Brownell could not visit them due to an assassination attempt in 2014 by GVL security and that Jabbah's claims were influenced by monthly stipends he received from the company.

"Golden Veroleum is a country by itself," wrote Saydee Monboe, the spokesman of the BWDA. "They control the police. They control our lawmakers. They control some of the local chiefs and they are the Republic of Golden Veroleum."

GVL responded that it "reserve[d] the right to pursue legal avenues." It characterized the alleged assassination attempt against Brownell as "highly inflammatory and nonsensical" and challenged the role of the lawyer in the dispute, noting that "A-Bloteh itself decided to engage GVL directly, without their lawyer," from September 2013 onward.

The strategy of all parties has been to discredit the authority of their opponent to act on behalf of the community. It's a reasonable approach, given that much of the RSPO process unfolds through highly orchestrated meetings between communities and investors, at which a few elected individuals represent the interests of the many. Discrediting the authority of someone to speak can remove that

person from the negotiating process altogether. The complaint against GVL has always been challenging, but according to Krishnan, “This incident,” meaning the riot, “has made things more complex than ever before.”

'If you look at the history of Malaysia, the alleviation of poverty has a direct link with the rise of palm oil in the region.'

—Ravin Krishnan, Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil

The only person whose authority has not been called into question is Manewah's. Almost all of the correspondence regarding the riot and its immediate aftermath notes that Manewah was not involved. Yet his name remained on the writ of arrest, in which GVL is listed as the plaintiff.

According to Manewah, both government officials and company representatives have encouraged A-Bloteh to stop working with Brownell “because he is creating a deadlock.” But they need a lawyer's help, explains Manewah. In Liberia, Brownell is a controversial character. But removing him would leave the community without legal representation. “If Alfred Brownell doesn't appear here, how will we understand the situation?”

If it were true that the government and the company are encouraging the community not to work with Brownell, says Krishnan, it would violate the principles of the RSPO: “The community is under an obligation to get independent legal advice.” But, he cautions, the truth in these situations can be hard to ascertain. “It depends on who you are talking to.”

Krishnan acknowledges that in Liberia, palm oil plantations have not been universally welcomed. “Some people are for it, some are against it,” he says. “But if you look at the history of Malaysia, the alleviation of poverty has a direct link with the rise of palm oil in the region.” The people who are establishing these plantations, he says, hope to repeat that in Liberia.

The arrests

Greenville, the capital of Sinoe county, is about a 30-minute drive from Butaw. At the center of town is a small police station, where those who were arrested after the riots were initially held.

In the back there is a small windowless cell, about 6 feet by 10 feet. Men relieve themselves in a bucket in the corner. It's swelteringly hot, and without ventilation, the smell is overwhelming. Eighteen young men crowd the front, desperate for air. The youngest is 17, he says, but he looks much younger. Most have physical injuries: cuts and bruises, swollen faces. One looks like he received a machete blow to the head. All of these were received from the police, say the detainees, who insist that they were not among the rioters. Almost without exception, they work for the company. “All we want is to go back to work,” says Elphonso Davis.

In Liberia, people who are detained must be informed of the charge against them and, if not formally charged within 48 hours, be released. In total, 35 villagers were arrested.

When I visited the jail the day after the riot, police officers insisted that the detentions were temporary. “I think by tomorrow, they will be released,” said Lawrence Koluswen Saykhah, the special assistant police commander for Sinoe county.

But by mid-August at least 15 of the men were still in custody and accused of armed robbery and economic sabotage. Many of their names were on the writ of arrest that was issued in the immediate aftermath of the riot. Among them was Fred Thompson.

Men wait in a cell inside the police station in Greenville, Sinoe county. (Click to enlarge images)

Thompson was born and raised in Butaw. His family members have called this area home for generations, though many of them perished in the country's long civil war. In the community, he was known as a hard worker and a good father, even though, neighbors say, he was probably only 24 years old. Police believed he was one of the ringleaders of the incident in May, and that he should be charged.

Thompson was incarcerated for 49 days before dying of unknown causes. He was quickly buried, without an autopsy. The cause of his death remains a mystery.

The lack of an autopsy sent a wave of whispers through Butaw. Some villagers believe he died of malaria left untreated. Others think the police beat him to death. For weeks, villager elders demanded that the government exhume the body to perform a proper autopsy. But they were ignored, adding weight to the conspiracy theories.

GVL maintains that it is the job of the Liberian police to determine who should be released, not the company. “We would expect people who are detained to be treated by the law,” says Virgil Magee, head of corporate communications. But Liberia, only a decade removed from civil war, is still sorting out its rule of law, a state of affairs that can both hinder and help the companies that operate within its territory.

“What GVL continues to tell us is that they don't have much interest in pursuing the case,” says BWDA's Monboe. “But GVL is not giving us the true story. If you say you don't have interest, but you

reported the case, then you are the one who needs to say, 'OK, the things are looted, but I forgive you.'" If GVL is truly not responsible for what is happening in the prison, he challenges, then why isn't the company pressuring the government to drop these charges?

Across Liberia, many community groups are meeting to decide what parcels of land they will cede to palm oil companies. In Grand Bassa town, chief Cheo Johnson meets with villagers who oppose palm plantation expansion by the Equatorial Palm Oil Company, another palm oil company that operates in Liberia. (Click to enlarge images)

A new law

In 2009, citing increasing land violence, the government of Liberia established the Land Commission to determine how the country might address the issue of customary ownership. By late 2014, the commission had drafted the Land Rights Act, designed to address all property rights. If passed, it will be the first time in the history of the country that customary land is recognized as legally owned by the people who have lived on it for generations.

The law looks good on paper, but enforcement will be difficult. Intimidation and collusion between companies and the government can make free and informed consent in rural communities almost impossible. But the law will enshrine the people's right to negotiate.

"Now we have a 50/50 deal," says Manewah. With this law, companies will no longer be able to dictate the value of his land. "Today, they say a hectare of land is worth \$5." How can that be, he asks.

The Land Rights Act will mandate the surveying of all the land in Liberia and provide deeds to customary owners. This will happen over a period of 36 months, a promise that seems challenging to fulfill in a country notorious for its slow pace. The act, though introduced a year ago, still languishes before the government. Weak land governance has already allowed political and business elites to acquire community land through corrupt means. Industry insiders say they are concerned about how this law could shift the balance of power.

The future of Butaw

On July 29, two months after the riot, GVL reopened the Butaw plantation for "partial working activities," inviting 550 workers, less than half of its staff, to return. One of the company's conditions for reopening the plantation was increased security. "We've had strikes, we've had negotiations," explains Magee. "But we have never experienced this level of violence." To that end, the government of Liberia is providing an increased police presence in Butaw. Sources confirm that GVL will bear some of the costs. This raises the question: If a foreign company is paying for a public police force, to whom must these officers answer when things go awry?

But the full impact of the riot has yet to be realized. The unrest set back the land negotiations between GVL and the community — negotiations that the company needs to expand. On Sept. 20, the company announced in a press release that it would scale back its operations; 330 employees at the Butaw farm were laid off. In lieu of employment, they received one and a half months' salary for each year worked, one month of salary in lieu of notice and one month of salary for September, plus a bag of rice.

The announcement came five days before the RSPO was scheduled to make a fact-finding mission to the farm following the events of the riot. Local advocates believe the announcement was timed to both blackmail the community into ceding their land to the company, in return for maintaining jobs, and to limit the ability of the RSPO to conduct a proper investigation.

"This is exactly our concern about these kinds of development," says Brownell, the lawyer who continues to represent the community. Without land to farm, and now without jobs, the citizens of Butaw are in a terrible position. "You took their farm land, you gave them jobs, now you lay them off. You give them a bag of rice and a month's pay. What do they do now? There is no more land. It's filled with palm oil."

Palm oil companies promise to bring development to the villages they operate in, often in the form of education. Here, students study in a classroom in Grand Bassa, built by Equatorial Palm Oil. (Click to enlarge images)

The men and women who worked on the plantation are now without work. It's too late to plant crops this season. GVL employs roughly 2,000 Liberians across all their palm oil plantations. In the future, the company hopes, that number will rise to 40,000. There are about 41,000 people who live in the vicinity of Golden Veroleum Liberia plantations. By this estimate, one might assume the company hopes to employ every single villager. Their children will attend company schools. They will move to the capital, Monrovia, to complete their university educations. And when they return home, they will manage the plantation where they grew up.

Manewah is less convinced.

In the four months since the riot, he has continued to hide in the forest. At this point, all the parties, including the government and the company, have acknowledged that he was not involved in the riots. Still, he remains a wanted man.

While I was in Butaw, nearly all the residents I spoke to told me that they liked the company. Their lives had improved. There were now jobs and schools. But after the raids and the detentions, and

without their local leaders present to advocate on their behalf, the people of Butaw were left in a very vulnerable position. The unwavering declarations of approval for the company began to sound like cries for mercy.

“The life of black men, the life of white men — it’s not the same,” Manewah laments. “We are poor. We are left on the ground, and it’s the ground we are depending on.”

The palm trees, he says, will simply have to wait.

Edited by Jayati Vora, Mark Rykoff

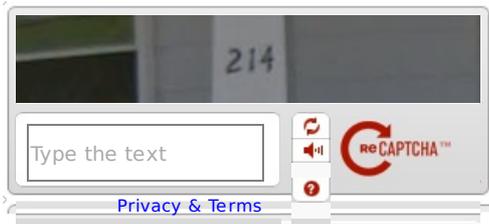
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