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The Point | 2 September 2021

"Find, fix and finish him"

Campaigning against the odds emanating from Okomu Oil Palm Plantation in Edo State Nigeria is risk prone. This is especially so when you look back at the ruthless mode of eviction of locals in the concession area under

spotlight.

Some of the accusations against the Company range from locking out citizens from entrance to their communities, seizure of the fishing traps from women using the stream for their livelihood activities, arsonist attacks, the use of brute force and military might on villages near their concession area, amongst other deceptions to discredit and suppress legitimate grievances from communities and activists.

Due to his constant and fearless advocacy for community rights, 53 years old Chief Ajele Sunday, is thought to be Company's most wanted. In such a circumstance, he must stay alert to escape the fury of the Company's operatives.



Grassroots Defender Chief Ajele Sunday

This is a revelation depicting the magnitude of the challenges Sunday is exposed to as National President of the Community Forest Watch and spokesperson of Okomu Clan.

Like every other activist standing up to the vested interest of authorities and the inhumane treatment of the suffering people of Nigeria, especially in Ovia South West Local Government Area of Edo State, Sunday has been facing threats to his life and freedom.

His testimonies are chilling, for instance in one instance in 2021, he was detained by the Department of State Security Services in Edo State on false allegation that he planted a bomb at the Company's facilities. He would also get arrested for reportedly being involved in the murdering of four persons in the plantation. He was released unconditionally on each occasions.

Determined to further cower him into submission, Sunday was accused in 2012 of sponsoring militant groups and was labeled as a dangerous militant leader by the Nigerian Army 4th Brigade Edo State. A coded message, the 3Fs "Find, Fix and Finish him" was then issued for Sunday.

His story is a classic example of the extent to which state security personnel can go in criminalizing harmless people only trying to survive.

According to Sunday, he was arrested by an army officer - a Lt Colonel who took him into a darkroom for several hours of torture under coercive interrogation. "To my amazement, the Lt Colonel told me that he himself is a victim of land grab, and could do nothing even though he is a military personnel. He said that he would help me but warned against disclosing his identity."

The Lt. Colonel later advised him to urgently present a petition to the Commandant 4 Brigades and copy all sister security agencies in the state, which he did.

How it started

Ajele Sunday is an insurance practitioner by profession, who doubles as an activist. He sells insurance for living and because he manages his own time, he has been able to do his insurance marketing successfully, shifting between the two jobs with relative ease. Actually, activism comes naturally for him, dating back to his days in secondary school in early 80's.

It all erupted in September 2010, when his community, Markilolo, received an eviction notice from the Management of Okomu Oil Palm Plantation Company. He led the community in resisting the eviction order, despite soldiers and yellow machines being in combat readiness to move on the poor people. In spite of the associated risks, he prides himself as a celebrated champion of indigenous and community rights, and therefore remains unfazed.

He told the MRU CSO Platform that he has been appalled by what he sees as the Okomu Plantation Company's disregard for local rights, which he believes is leading to the deprivation of livelihoods, characterized by the unrestrained brutality and ejection of citizens from their ancestral land.

Sunday says he's certain that the gross human rights abuses being perpetrated against the locals by the Company, such as the burning of villages and the mass displacement of villagers have been made possible only because state security agencies are doing the bidding of the Company, thereby compromising the interests of citizens. "Instead of jubilation for the investment, there's a cry everywhere the company shows up because of its aggressive expansion agenda," Sunday added.

He disclosed: "Between 1990 and 2000, Okomu Security personnel, working with operatives of the Nigerian Army forcefully evicted four communities (including Agbede, Oweike, and Lehmon) and demolished their houses and properties, in addition to seizing their farmland without compensation." He said Okomu/Socfin has even gone to the length of disallowing women from using the stream for fishing, which amounts to denying the locals a livelihood.

The company argues that it was issued what is referred to as 'Certificate of Occupancy,' therefore it can evict any community in the designated operation area at will. The referenced certificate, posted on the Company's website, was issued by the military in 1986 for a period of ninety-nine years, at N20.00 per hectare per annum.

The Okomu-Socfin Marriage

Okomu Oil Palm was established in 1976 as a Federal Government pilot project. The Company was privatized in 1979. Soon after privatization, Socfin Group, a holding company listed on the Luxembourg Stock Exchange, bought 64.97% shares, thus making Socfin the majority shareholder. Also known as Société Financière des Caoutchoucs, Socfin has direct and indirect interest in oil palm and rubber plantation operations and marketing of oil palm seeds in Asia, Africa and other parts of the world.

Sunday says he's furious, but not surprised that the Company has since been involved in violating the rights of the indigenous host, unfortunately with the backing of the government. In January 2021, protesting affected communities accused the Company and the Edo State government of maltreatment, harassment and enslavement.

Sunday told reporters after the protest that: "The state government sells the land to multinational companies... If you sell the land, where do you want these people to survive? Ordinarily, we expected the State government to come to the aid of these host communities and question this multinational why the ill-treatment but unfortunately, the State government has joined them in the enslavement."

On 20th May 2020, a remote fishing village of Ijaw-Gbene in Southern Nigeria was allegedly set ablaze by people believed to have been acting at the urging of the Company. According to Sunday, witnesses pointed to the Company's security and members of the Nigerian army for the violent act. However, the company's spokesman Mr. Fidelis Oliseh dismissed the accusation.

The attack on Ijaw left local farmers and fishermen homeless with their properties destroyed. Over eighty people who were living in the village were forced to find shelter in neighboring communities and in churches. This is all happening in the wake of the raging coronavirus pandemic, which has evidently exposed and exacerbated the many existing inequalities, to which indigenous peoples such as those in the village of Ijaw-Gbene and other parts of Nigeria, cannot be exempt.

Petition

The crimes documented by the affected people have reportedly happened with the full knowledge of the Federal and local state security who have been protecting the Company. These crimes have so far been committed against the poor people without any redress. In a joint letter dated September 4, 2020, local communities petitioned Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari to take steps to get the perpetrators to account. The petitioners said, "We understand that Okomu may claim to be contributing to the Edo State Government's internally generated revenue, but at what expense?"

The aggrieved communities told the Nigerian leader, "We cannot continue to accept a practice of profit-above-humans' syndrome that has been typical of the operations of Okomu/SOCFIN groups in Nigeria and Africa. Business must respect human rights and where these are in danger, the government must protect her citizens and remedy must be provided for victims, after all, Nigeria not only supported, but also promoted the promulgation of the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and Okomu should not be allowed to continue to act with impunity."

Following the petition, the State Government of Edo constituted a committee to investigate the long running claims of the affected communities, but nothing concrete has so far come out of the probe. In fact, Sunday observed that a separate investigation launched by the police, appeared more like a smokescreen as he says he was made to provide transportation and logistics for the investigative team to travel on site, which he could not continue. In effect, the matter has been closed.

Same Story Everywhere

There is no shortage of complains about the operations of Socfin's subsidiaries in the West African sub-region and elsewhere. From Sierra Leone to Liberia, Ghana, Cameroon and Kenya among other places, the trademark of Socfin affiliated companies is conspicuous.

A report by Earthsight, a non-profit organization digs into Socfin's alleged "abuses in Africa despite pledges" to do better. In Liberia, a Swiss-based NGO "Bread for All" documented a number of rights violations, including sexual harassment committed by SOCFIN subsidiary, the Salala Rubber Corporation (SRC). This is aside the land grab. In fact, Socfin's operation in Liberia is subject of a current compliance audit of the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman (CAO) of the International Finance Corporation, growing out of complaint filed by the environmental and land rights group, Green Advocates International against the Company on behalf of twenty-six affected communities.

In Sierra Leone, an international food rights organization, FIAN points to what it sees as the conflicting situation left among villagers as a result of 18,000 ha of oil palm concession granted Socfin in the Malen Chiefdom, Southern Province of Pujehun. The head of a local woman's organization Aminata Fabba, explained to the People's Forum of the MRU CSO Platform how the unfair land deal has disposed them of their means of livelihood.

She said an attempt by the army in 2019, to disperse a mass meeting of people who had actually gathered to celebrate what was dubbed 'good news,' resulted into the shooting to death of two people, allegedly by soldiers. She suggested that state security personnel are used often by the Company to intimidate and subdue dissent.

In Cameroon, Socfin is accused of land grabbing, polluting local water sources, harsh working conditions, and encroachment of communities' space for food crops, just to name a few.

In many of the operation areas, the Company is accused of expanding their plantations without the free, prior and informed consent of locals. The effect is averse -destroying and uprooting poor indigenous peoples from their means of survival, including the desecration of their sacred heritage.

So, this is reason enough for Sunday to organize his people, instilling in them the sense of collective action to defend their legitimate rights.

Their collective fortitude has so far paid off in ensuring that the Markilolo Community has resisted eviction. But their tenuous success comes with harsh prices. Sunday explains how they have had to contend with the situation where their main community entry route was sealed off by the army and security personnel for several months to serve as punishment for their resistance.

But Sunday's level of commitment in fighting for the deprived communities has been a source of encouragement and resilience in the affected communities. He is emboldened by what he sees as the Company's design to influence some community dwellers with cash and other gifts to go against him. They have not succeeded.

His motivation and passion behind this campaign can be deciphered against the background of the unconscionable acts of violence this multinational agriculture conglomerate, with the backing of the Nigerian government, has been inflicting on people living in destitute conditions. He's resolved to still engage until some justice is served.

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The Author

This article is written by the Secretariat of the Mano River Union Civil Society Natural Resources Rights and Governance Platform (MRU SCO Platform). It is designed to give visibility to the untold stories of frontline grassroots human rights defenders across West Africa. The MRU CSO Platform is a network of environmental, land and human rights defenders; indigenous, urban slums and squatter communities; communities affected by the operations of multinational corporations; Its membership is drawn from nine of the fifteen countries in West Africa. Namely: Liberia, Sierra Leone, La Cote D'Ivoire, Guinea, Ghana, Mali, Nigeria, Niger and Senegal. Contact: mrucsoplatform@gmail.com

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