This Saturday, 16 March 2019, military forces fired live bullets at villagers from Bolombo and Wamba in the municipality of Mwingi, and from Bokala-wamba, within the Lokutu oil palm plantation concession area of the Canadian company Feronia Inc, in Tshopo Province, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The incident follows weeks of growing tension between the communities and the company at the Lokutu and Boteka plantations, where communities have recently filed a complaint with the international complaints mechanism of the German development bank (DEG) denouncing the company's illegal occupation of their territories.

This week, the communities have blocked company vehicles from transporting palm nuts from the Lokutu plantation sites, both along the Womba route (municipality of Bolombo 1) and the Mosité-Lokutu route (municipality of Boleda). The communities say that the only way for them to have their voices and demands heard is to block the company from operating.

Since beginning of this year, the communities have been protesting over unpaid or underpaid wages for local workers on the plantations and at the company's local operations. They have also been calling for the company to comply with their long-standing request to return lands that the communities say were illegally taken from them, going back to the time of the Belgian colonial occupation.

These grievances were once again communicated by the villagers of Mwingi to government authorities and the company in a letter sent on January 13, 2019. The villagers of Mwingi also carried out protests to communicate their grievances directly to the upper management of the company.

In response to the January protests, Feronia's directors told the villagers of Mwingi, at a meeting the national organisation RIAO-RDC was present, that the company would immediately address the issue of unpaid wages. The company also claimed that issues with unpaid wages were a result of the complaint that RIAO-RDC had led to the international complaints mechanism in November 2018, on behalf of nine communities at Feronia's Boteka and Lokutu concessions.

According to RIAO-RDC's local sources, Feronia resumed payments of some salaries at its Lokutu operations but many of the company's daily labourers, which account for 70% of its workforce, claim that they have only received partial payment for the hours worked. The company's actions have therefore not addressed the communities' grievances, and as a result conflicts have escalated.
The villagers of Mwingi subsequently took action to block the company from accessing its plantations on their territories and began harvesting the palm fruits and processing palm oil themselves. When Feronia tried to shift its harvesting efforts to plantations within the neighbouring territory of Bolombo, the villagers of Bolombo also blocked the company's access by destroying two bridges used by the company to transport fruits. A military contingent was sent to the area and this is when shots were fired.

As national and international civil society organisations actively supporting the communities affected by Feronia's plantations in the DR Congo, we are deeply troubled by the current conflicts in the Lokutu area. The loss of lands and the company's failure to provide benefits to the local people have resulted in serious impacts on the rights of local communities and their living conditions.

These conflicts with local communities are a direct result of Feronia's long-standing occupation of their territories without their consent. In the absence of benefits from the company's presence on their territories, the communities say they have little choice but to take action to repossess their lands. Feronia's efforts to dodge its responsibility by blaming the complaints process for its financial difficulties has only added fuel to the fire.

We call for the relevant authorities in the DR Congo, the European development banks that finance and/or own shares in Feronia and the European states that are involved to immediately investigate the reports of unpaid and underpaid wages and to ensure that the company is in full compliance with national legislation and international standards.

We call on the DEG and the other development banks financing Feronia — CDC (UK), Proparco (France), FMO (Netherlands), BIO (Belgium), OPIC (US), AECID (Spain) and others— to ensure that Feronia stops all abuses and violence against the communities and stops all actions designed to undermine the complaints process that the communities and the company are engaged in and in which the communities hope to resolve their long-standing struggle for their lands.

We are particularly alarmed by Feronia's actions over the past few days to organise a closed-door meeting on the company premises in Lokutu between a high-level Feronia delegation and local community leaders to sign agreements, in which members of RIAO-RDC were prevented from participating. This meeting, which involves numerous high-level Feronia representatives from outside of the DRC, is taking place during the time in which a preliminary meeting was scheduled to take place between the panel of the international complaints mechanism and the nine communities who had submitted the complaint, but was postponed because the panel members did not receive their visas.

Finally, we call for a withdrawal of any armed military or police from the Lokutu area to avoid any violent escalation in the conflict. We demand a peaceful solution.

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