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### Rubber Theft: Urgent Need For Gov't. Action

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The year 2013 was not good for the rubber industry. According to the Central Bank of Liberia 2013 Annual Report, the international price of commodity declined from US\$3,304.20 per metric ton in January to US\$2,558.90 per metric ton in December (a 22.6% decline). The CBL cited reasons such low activity in the global manufacturing sector, especially automobiles, as well as low input demand from a heavy user like China. These global dynamics, coupled with extensive re-planting in the industry at home, caused local productivity to decline by 12.8% since the year 2012.

Apart from the global downward industry trends, the Liberian rubber industry is threatened by more organic effects. The Rubber Planters Association of Liberia (RPAL) on Monday sounded an alarm: rubber theft around the country is on the increase, causing crippling losses to farmers in this most vital sector, rubber.

The CBL maintains that even with a steady decline in rubber output over the last two years, rubber remains the second most important asset to our economy, after iron ore. It is one of the industries that was significantly destroyed during the war. Rubber was affected in two terrible ways, the first being rubber theft and the second, the felling of rubber trees on planters' farms by unscrupulous charcoal dealers for fire coal.

We have to say that some of the major rubber planters were themselves responsible for the first problem, rubber theft. How? Some of the major players, the giant among them Firestone included, started buying rubber indiscriminately from whomever would sell. Soon, as one traveled through the country, one could see signs along the highways saying "Rubber Buying Station" for various

companies, including Firestone. This indiscriminate buying opportunity encouraged anyone, rubber farmer or non-rubber farmer, to sell rubber, no matter how he got it. This opened the floodgate for stealing other people's rubber.

And one of the first victims became Firestone itself, and not Firestone only but rubber planters across the country.

So even Firestone, which has for decades maintained a well staffed and well equipped Plant Protection Department (PPD), was unable to cope with the widespread and well armed attacks by rubber thieves. They employed not only cutlasses and other weapons but acid as well in their raids on various Firestone divisions in a ruthless bid to seize rubber from the production sites as well as from illicit tapping.

If the giant plantation, Firestone, was affected by this menace, how much more the small farmers? Everybody suffered, and the small farmers lost not just their stolen rubber, but their rubber trees as well, for when rubber thieves had done their worst, the charcoal burners took over, indiscriminately felling trees for the demanding trade.

Yes, fire coal was in demand because the forces of Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Party of Liberia (NPFL) in 1990 destroyed the Mount Coffee Hydro-electric plant in Harrisburg. The total loss of electricity immediately forced most people, including city dwellers, to switch to generators and charcoal for their energy needs, especially at home.

The result was devastating not only for rubber planters, but for the country's ecology as well, as people started cutting down every tree in sight to burn charcoal for the demanding market.

In response to the increasing rubber theft, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf issued Executive Order No. 50 in April 2013, banning all rubber brokers, people who were selling rubber regardless of how they got it, from selling the commodity, most of which was stolen.

But the RPAL is now saying that that Executive Order is not enough and much more needs to be done.

Clearly, the RPAL and the major players in the business, Firestone, the Liberia Agriculture Company (LAC), Salala Rubber Company and Morris American Rubber, need to schedule an urgent meeting with the Government. The Ministries which should be involved in that meeting are Agriculture, Finance, Justice and Commerce in particular, to find a solution to this rubber stealing menace that now threatens the whole economy.

A stitch in time saves nine.

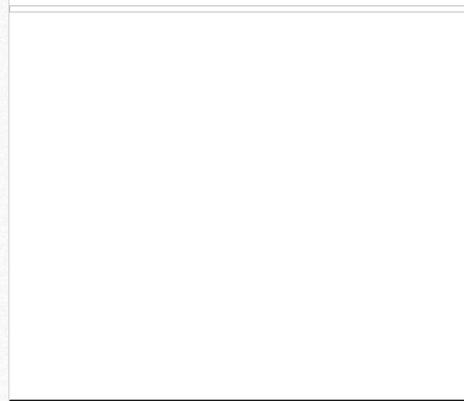


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