



Oil palm farmers want UN to cut ties with Bidco Uganda

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The relationship between palm oil farmers in Kalangala and Bidco Uganda has hit a new low, with the former now asking the United Nations to cut off ties with the latter.

Through their umbrella body, Bugala Farmers Association, the farmers said in a statement on Monday that Bidco has had their land “grabbed, human rights violated, and degraded the environment.”

The UN deals with Bidco through the International Fund for Agricultural Development (Ifad), where the agency says it supports small-scale farmers to grow palms and sell to Bidco Uganda.

They added that over 100 farmers say they lost their land to Bidco when, in partnership with the local government, the company deforested more than 7,500 hectares (18,500 acres) of rainforest and smallholder farms on Bugala island on Lake Victoria to make way for the palm oil plantation, one of the largest on the continent.

“The Bugala Farmers Association calls on UNDP and its senior leadership to examine the morally-questionable association of such a distinguished UN organisation with such a blatant violator of human rights that is Bidco Africa,” the statement says.

“The evidence of Bidco Africa’s poor business practices is well documented, and UNDP must immediately disassociate itself with such a company.”



A farmer in an oil palm plantation

This is not the first time the Kalangala farmers are up in arms against Bidco. Last year in March, a group of farmers filed a lawsuit against Oil Palm Uganda Limited (Opul), a subsidiary of Bidco Uganda, and Amos Ssempe, a Kampala businessman, for snatching their land. Ssempe, who leased the land to Opul, said he was the owner and that the farmers were squatters.

Ssempe told the press that “due processes were followed and farmers were compensated.” He added: “They [the farmers] signed that they received the money.”

The case is still pending.

Later, more than 30 out-growers pulled out of the Kalangala Oil Palm Project, citing unstable prices and exorbitant interest rates on loans. Bidco and Ifad usually give them the loans.

By continuing to work with Bidco, farmers say, the UN, which is supposed to protect their rights, has betrayed them. The UN has not responded to the farmers’ petition.

But last year, Ann Turinayo, the Uganda communication and knowledge management officer for Ifad involved in Kalangala, told The Guardian, UK: “We give highly-subsidized finance to government which benefits small farmers in Kalangala.” And that they were not involved in any land acquisitions.

“We [Ifad] support people who are growing oil palms on their own land. There are more than 1,600 farmers in Kalangala, who are growing oil palms at a commercial basis on their own land, and these are the people we support.”

But farmers now want the UN to stop dealing with Bidco. Friends of the Earth Uganda, an environment NGO, said in a 2012 report, that the palm oil project, which is now 15 years old, has largely had a devastating effect on the environment.

“A large proportion of the palm oil plantations are in areas previously covered by natural forest. An estimated 3,600 hectares of forest have been destroyed to make way for the palm oil plantations, including 100 hectares of the protected Gala forest reserve in Bugala, Kalangala,” the report said.

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