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## Liberia: Salala Rubber Corporation accused of masterminding violence against affected communities, Green Advocates

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## Liberia: Salala Rubber Corporation accused of masterminding violence against affected communities, Green Advocates

By Gerald C. Koinyeneh

Salala Rubber Corporation, established in 1959, holds a concession of over 40,000 hectares in central Liberia, but has often been accused of land grabbing and destruction of the locals' farms, including private rubber farms and edible crops like eddoes and plantains.



Quita George, mother of five, and head of the Dokai Ta

Women said she was attacked by men loyal to the company but had to escape through the bushes.

Weala, Margibi County – Aggrieved residents of affected communities have accused the Salala Rubber Corporation (SRC) in Margibi County of masterminding a wave of violent attacks against them and Green Advocates International (GAI).

The residents claimed that the latest attacks by the group, comprising current employees and contractors of the company have led some residents including local activists to flee the area for fear of their lives, while most of them who left behind are now living with fear.

“We were suffering, we didn’t know our rights, but since Green Advocates came, our eyes have opened and we now know our rights to stand up for our land,” said Quita George, head of the women’s group in Dokai Ta -, one of the affected towns near the company’s gigantic plantation.

“That’s why they (SRC) are now supporting the citizens who are working with them to turn against Green Advocates and anybody that will work with Green Advocates.”

When contacted by a team of independent investigative reporters who visited the area recently, the Human Resource Manager of SRC, Jallah Mensah said he could not comment officially on the company’s matters because he was on vacation. “I cannot say anything about that because I am on vacation, and if I comment now, it means I am working,” he said.

What Sparks the Latest Violence?

According to the residents, the violence erupted when the pro-company group disrupted series of meetings that were scheduled between them and staff of GAI -and its partners.

The meetings with several communities near the plantation were intended for GAI staff to provide updates on the status of a complaint filed with the International Financial Corporation (IFC) in 2019 against SRC.

The Compliance Advisor Ombudsman (CAO) is investigating land grab, economic displacement and loss of livelihood, labor rights violation, gender-based violence and threats of reprisals and intimidation by SRC.

GAI and her partners including Alliance for Rural Democracy (ARD), the Natural Resources Women Platform, and Yeagbamah National Congress for Human Rights filed a complaint with the IFC against SRC in 2019.

In 2008, the company received US\$ 10 million loan from the IFC. The citizens in their complaint alleged that the loan was used to evict them from their ancestral land without Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), something advocates say violate the IFC’s policy.

The meetings were also intended for GAI to understand the impact of COVID 19 on local communities and to afford award-winning Cameroonian environmental and human rights activist Nasako Besingi provide his

experiences on how communities can jointly fight multi-national corporations that intend to exploit them of their land rights.

The meetings were aborted and ended in deadlock – owing to stiffed resistance from the protesters, the residents said.

George, explaining her ordeal, said on the day of the meeting, she received a distressed call from staff of GAI, informing her that they have been attacked at the main entrance of the plantation; and when she went there, she, too was caught up in the violence.

“When I received the call, I was afraid to go there first, but I thought that I could help to talk with those behind the attack, since we all are from this place but when I arrived, John Penneh’s brother (one of the leaders), became to point at me that I was with Green Advocates. When I saw the crowd coming towards me, I ran in the bush and walked through the bush until I got to safety,” Madam George recalls.

Moses K. Yiah, Town Chief of Dokai Ta , also explains that following the attacks against GAI staff, the protesters – then began to search for local activists working with GAI, prompting some of them to flee.

Yiah said one of them, Abraham Penneh fled the area, along with his wife and five children after the pro-company men went searching for him in the wake of the incident.

FrontPage Africa has gathered that GAI has filed a lawsuit at the Weala Magisterial Court against alleged perpetrators of the violence against its staff. Several individuals have been arrested in connection to the incident and awaiting trial, while some are on the run.

Town Chief Yiah hails GAI for standing by them and vowed to do the same despite stiff opposition from some of his own people that are being backed by the company.

“I tell Green Advocates thank you for opening our eyes and standing by us. And I promised to be with them. Even when they call me at midnight to go there (to court), I will go and be with them until we see the end of the case,” he told FrontPage in a recent interview

### Villagers Demand Right to Land

Established in 1959, SRC holds a concession of over 40,000 hectares in central Liberia.

The company merged with a rubber processing factory, Weala Rubber Company in 2007, with the merger retaining its name.

A year later, the new company received a US\$10 million loan from the International Finance Corporation (IFC) to expand its plantation. The expansion was marred by the eviction of several towns and villages, the destruction of farms including private rubber farms and edible crops like eddoes and plantains.

There have been series of contentions over the failure to pay compensation for damaged crops and the lack of farmlands for local communities to cultivate. Farming is a source of income for local community members.

“We are suffering here. This is not the original Monkey Tail Village -. The company evicted us from our own village and the person who opened this village allowed us to stay here,” says David Sumo, a 75 year-old man of Monkey Tail Town, one of the 22 affected communities.

“We want our land back because the company is of no help to us; after getting our land, it cannot employ our children to tap rubber or slash grass, but leave us out in everything, making us stranded here and nowhere to go.”

Nora Massa, a youthful resident added: “We were born and raised in this town but we are not going to school. Before we work, except they have sex with us. If we disagree, we will not work.”

“We want our land back so our parents can use it to farm in order to send us to school for a better future. Because for now, we are suffering and there is no hope,” Massa lamented.

The longstanding land dispute in Margibi and neighboring Bong County, involving villagers and SRC led the 22 villages to file a complaint to the International Finance Corporation’s Compliance Advisor Ombudsman (CAO).

The IFC found the communities’ compliant eligible following an assessment mission here in June last year. The communities opted for a resolution to the dispute with the company—one of two options under the IFC’s complaint mechanism. However, SRC chose a compliance audit, the other option.

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