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Landowners face jail term in Sierra Leone after resisting against Large Scale Land Investor

By Ishmael Kindama Dumbuya

Landowners in Sierra Leone have been found guilty by a high court in Southern Sierra Leone after they were allegedly found guilty of damaging the plantation of large scale land investors in the country. Among the six community people that were found guilty by Justice Babatunde Edwards in Bo is the former Sierra Leone Peoples Party Member of Parliament for Pujehun District, Hon. Shaka Musa Sama who is also serving as the Chairman for the Malen Land Owners Association (MALOA). Hon. Sama was found guilty of inciting locals against the Company.

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Farm lands occupied by Socfin Agricultural Company in Malen Chiefdom

According to Justice Babatunde Edwards the local people damaged the plantation of a multinational company, Socfin who had grabbed thousands of hectares of community land in Pujehun. The first to fifth accused were sentenced to five months in prison or pay \$5,100 fine for 1st -5th accused. The Leader and 6th accused were fined \$10,200 or face 6 months in prison. This is a landmark judgment and sentencing which shocks many activists especially when the court is sentencing local community people in foreign currency. They are to pay forthwith their fines. They were all sandwiched to a nearby Prison where they are presently spending nights after unable to pay their fines. Some Civil society Organizations and human rights activists are however sourcing funds through donations for the release of the landowners.

Many land rights activists condemned the action of Socfin. They preferred that instead of taking the land owners to court, they should have allowed compromise with the people for the fact that they are farming on the lands of the landowners without their full consent.

Green Scenery is a local governmental organization working on community livelihoods. According to its Director the verdict to them is both "lenient and harsh". Mr. Joseph Rahall said "it is lenient in jail terms but harsh in fines". He also said regarding the entire case "we believe that those six executive members of MALOA may be victims of a situation that they have been fighting to change for many years and for which our government ignored".

Mr. Rahall said many efforts on their part to raise the required attention from government were trivialized and "today the Malen people are multiple victims". "Their lands have been taken away, they have lost the sources of their livelihoods, they have witness police brutality and several court appearances since 2012 including this one in which they are required to pay a total fine of Le 210,000,000 or go to jail for a maximum of six months. With the frustrations of seeking justice and the constant humiliation and dehumanizing any activist will feel terribly angry" he said.

Thousands of hectares of Community lands were forcefully taken from them by the Socfin Agricultural Company through the Government of Sierra Leone in a shady deal more than five years ago without properly educating the land owners the outcomes of the deal in future. After lacking places to get their livelihoods through farming and other related communal activities, the landowners in 2013 instituted resistance and demanded the Government of Sierra Leone to modify the lease agreement but there has hardly been any government officer from either the Ministry of Agriculture or the Ministry of Justice who played central role towards the land lease agreement to comment on the issue.

Large scale Land investment is presently a major threat in west Africa including Sierra Leone. There are more than five large scale land investors in Sierra Leone who had successes in grabbing thousands of hectares of lands of the community people through shady agreements with government officials. Unfortunately, the Government of Sierra Leone whose central role is it to protect its people through the police has been down playing their role while the investors enjoy field day in the country. In most cases in the Malen Chiefdom in Pujehun District, the Sierra Leone Police, the Paramount Chief, PC Kebbie and other stakeholders have been siding the company and succeeded in the Police arresting and beating of land owners.

There are however many Pujehun descendants who are aggrieved and expressed their disappointment to me for the present land disputes in the district but however prefer anonymity since they are key stakeholders in the government.

For now if the government of Sierra Leone does not really address the concerns of the land owners, the same situation is expected to occur in Malen especially when Socfin's plantation will remain on their lands for the next 45 years



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