

The March against Land Grabs

August 9, 2017 12:13 am

Civil Society Organisations in Edo State, under the umbrella of Coalition for Protection of the Environment, recently staged a protest against land grabbing and deforestation. Adibe Emeyonu who was there, reports

Bose Eruanga is a peasant farmer from Uzalla, Owan West Local Government Area of Edo State. Eruanga, as a widow with six children depends on the produce from the farmlands in her community to train her children.

Pastor Sunday Erha, a native of Uhumora, also in Owan West Government Area also depends on farming to take care of his family of seven apart from his pastoral calling.

Mrs. Esther Osagiede, from Orhua Agudezi, Uhumwode Local Government Area is in the same league with Erha and Eruanga, who depend on farming for livelihood.

The trio, are among several farmers from over 25 communities who are currently at war with Okomu Oil Palm Plc over alleged encroachment of their farm lands for agriculture.

The land in dispute covers 13,750 hectares spread in Okomu Village, Agbede, IK Camp, Makilolo, Memo, Oweike, Aibiosi, Sobe, Uhiere, Owan, Ugbebezi, Oke-Ora, Ekpan, One, Atorunu, Ogbetu, Umokpe, Orhua, Ozalla, Sabongida Ora, Odiguete, Agudezi, Uhumora, Uzebba, Odighi and others.

In order to resolve the dispute between the communities and Okomu Oil Palm after several complaints by the affected farmers in these communities, the Edo State Government revoked the land in a Gazette dated November 5, 2015.

It was gathered that the land in question was originally allotted to Iyayi Group of Companies for the purpose of planting trees, who in turn allegedly sold it to Okomu Oil. Upon taking possession, the company was said to have drafted bulldozers to these reserved lands to expand their operation thus, fueling the protest by the communities.

Having waited for nearly two years without the state government enforcing the revocation order, the affected communities resorted to taking their case to Environmental Rights Action/Friends of Earth Africa (ERA/FoEN) and other Civil Society Organisation (CSOs).

Against this backdrop, the group, under the aegis of Coalition for Protection of the Environment in Edo State, staged a protest against the Okomu Oil Plc on June 21, accusing the company of ^[x] ~~grazing~~ grazing to farming communities in the state.

[Skip and Visit Site >](#)

The coalition comprising farmers' association, lawyers, teachers, environmentalists, human rights defenders also marched against what it called "the growing wave of deforestation with concern for rising food prices due to scarcity of farmlands for small-scale farmers growing staple food."

The protesters recalled that on November 5, 2015, the Edo State Government through government revocation Order under the leadership of former Governor Adams Oshiomhole revoked 13,750 hectares de-reserved land in Owan and Okomu Forest Reserves from Okomu Oil Palm Company Plc, a member of the global SOCFIN Group which it illegally acquired.

Spokesman of the coalition and Executive Director of ERA/FoEN), Dr. Uyi Ojo, particularly, frowned at the fragrant disregard of Edo State revocation order by the company nearly two years after as it continued to defy the order to further its plantation business under the watch of the current state government.

In order to give the protest the desired attention, the coalition visited the Edo State House of Assembly, Edo State Government House and Oba of Benin Palace where they laid the same complaints.

At the assembly, the Speaker, Dr. Justine Okonobo thanked the protesters for conducting themselves in a civilised manner, noting that it's better to jaw-jaw than to war-war.

He promised that during next assembly sitting, the matter will be discussed, adding that "we will take the matter seriously."

However, when the group took their protest to Government House, no official came to address them, prompting the coalition to demand that Okomu Oil should vacate the 13,750 hectares of land it is occupying.

They also implored the state government to be on the side of the 21 communities affected by the land occupation. That the Okomu Oil Palm Company must obey the state government revocation order of 5th November, 2015.

According to them, "As a state currently with the second highest deforestation rate in Nigeria after Cross River State, with Okomu Oil Palm Company becoming one of the drivers of deforestation for oil palm cultivation in Nigeria, the company has continued to disregard the revocation order by the Edo State Government to further its expansion.

"The stakeholders-coalition including the impacted commune, farmers and civil society organisations and global environment is watching as you and your colleagues in Edo State Government move towards making a decision about the future of sustainable community-based forest management system in Edo State. We urge you to enforce the revocation order on Okomu Oil Palm Company Plc in Edo State and commence regeneration of the areas destroyed."

They further reminded the state government saying: "Plantations are not forests; communities' forest is not for sale. Host communities, civil society and scientists over the years have known that industrial plantation companies bring far more harm than good, contribute to climate change crisis through land use change soil contamination and pollution of water bodies which people depend on."

Mum also remained the reaction of the management of Okomu Oil as efforts to reach them proved abortive.

However, one dangerous aspect of the struggle by the farming communities is that they will not be able to get enough land to embark on agriculture and food production especially at this present time both the federal and state governments are laying more emphasis on agriculture as a means of overcoming the present recession the country finds itself.

Moreover, not too long ago, the state government launched its Agri-prenure with 1,000 hectares of land at the Sobe Farm Settlement where about 200 persons were empowered in the state Accelerated Agricultural Development Programme (AADP) for small-scale farmers, aimed at creating jobs and sustainable food production.

Not only that, Governor Obaseki during a programme commemorating the World Environmental Day, outlined part of his administration's agenda to salvage forest resources from degradation, revealing that in addition to the GPS land imaging system inaugurated in Benin four months ago, a firm had also been engaged to capture another 2000km².

Given these two scenarios, many are of view that the state government's continued silence over the revocation order, is capable of jeopardising its agricultural policies if it has refused to act by taking a stand either for or against.
