

Press Release : Violent tensions in the oil palm plantations of Feronia in DR Congo



On Saturday, March 16, 2019, soldiers reportedly fired live ammunition on villagers from Bolombo and Wamba in the Mwingi and Bokala-wamba groups in the oil palm plantation exploitation district of the Canadian Feronia Company in Lokutu, Province of Tshopo in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). This incident follows weeks of tension between communities and the company in the vicinity of its plantations in Lokutu, as well as in Boteka (Equateur Province), where communities filed an international complaint with the panel of the German Development bank (DEG) against Feronia claiming their lands which they consider to be illegally occupied.

March 20, 2019 - till today, several palm-based transport vehicles are blocked by communities affected by FERONIA activities. Whether on the section Wamba (Groupement Bolombo 1) where the communities have barricaded the evacuation routes of fruits, or on the section Mosité-Lokutu (Boleda Group), the communities say they have no any other choice for their voice to be heard and express their demands other than to block the activities of the company.

Since the beginning of this year, communities have been protesting against unpaid or underpaid wages of local workers in the company's plantations and local operations. They also asked the company to follow up on their long-standing request to release the land that has been illegally taken from them since the Belgian colonial era.

These claims were again communicated by the villagers of Mwingi to the government authorities and the company in a letter of 13 January 2019. The villagers of Mwingi also organized demonstrations to communicate their demands directly to the management of the company. In response to the January protests, Feronia leaders informed villagers in Mwingi, at a meeting where the national RIAO-DRC organization was present, that the company would immediately address the problem of unpaid wages. The company also claimed that unpaid wages were the result of a complaint to the

international complaints mechanism filed by RIAO-DRC in November 2018, on behalf of nine communities of Feronia concessions in Boteka and Lokutu.

According to local RIAO-DRC sources, Feronia has resumed payment of some wages at its Lokutu site, but many of the company's day laborers, who make up about 70 percent of its workers, say they have only received a partial payment of the hours worked. As a result, the company's actions did not respond to community demands therefore, the conflict intensified.

The villagers of Mwingi subsequently prevented the company from accessing its plantations on their territory and began harvesting the palm nuts to turn them into oil themselves. When Feronia tried to redirect its harvesting activities to plantations in neighboring Bolombo, villagers in Bolombo also blocked the company's access by destroying two bridges used by the company to transport the nuts. Soldiers were then sent to the area, and that was when the shooting took place.

As national and international civil society organizations actively supporting the communities affected by Feronia's activities in the DRC, we are deeply concerned by the ongoing conflicts in the Lokutu region. The loss of access to land and the company's failings have serious impacts on the rights of local communities and their living conditions.

These conflicts with local communities are a direct result of Feronia's long occupation of their territories without their consent. Faced with the failure to honor the promises made by the company in return for the occupation of their territories, the communities say they have no choice but to take back possession of their lands. Feronia's efforts to evade its responsibilities by citing the communities' complaint as the cause of its financial difficulties only fueled the conflict.

We call on the competent authorities in the DRC, the European development banks that finance and/or hold shares in Feronia and the European states involved to immediately investigate information of unpaid and underpaid salaries and to ensure that the company acts in accordance with national legislation and international standards.

We call on the DEG and the other development banks that finance Feronia - CDC (UK), Proparco (France), FMO (Netherlands), BIO (Belgium), OPIC (USA), AECID (Spain) and others - to ensure that Feronia puts an end to abuses and violence against communities and stops all manipulation aimed at undermining the complaint process and in which people hope to find a solution after decades of brutality and spoliations.

We are particularly concerned about Feronia's actions in recent days to hold a closed meeting at the company's premises in Lokutu between a high-level delegation from Feronia and local community leaders to signing agreements, while RIAO-RDC members were unable to participate.

The meeting, which also involves many high-level representatives of Feronia from abroad, takes place at the same time that a preliminary meeting should have taken place between the panel of the international complaints mechanism and the nine communities that had submitted the report complaint. This last meeting had to be postponed following the impossibility for the members of the panel to obtain their visas to come to the DRC. We call for the withdrawal of the military from the Lokutu region in order to avoid any violent escalation of the conflict and we call for a peaceful solution to this conflict.

Signatory organizations :

- RIAO-RDC
- GRAIN
- CNCD-11.11.11
- FIAN Belgium
- FIAN Germany
- WRM
- Global Justice Now !

- Entraide et Fraternité
- AEFJN (Belgium)
- GLAN

For further information please contact:

Jean-François Mombia Atuku,
RIO-RDC
jfmombia.at16@gmail.com
+221 77 346 96 21