

# Africa land grabs 'could cause conflicts'

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FREETOWN, Liberia, Feb. 3 (UPI) -- The stampede by wealthy states for arable land across Africa and other developing regions could trigger a series of conflicts if governments fail to protect the rights of their people, two recent studies on land grabs warn.

"Controversial land acquisitions were key a factor triggering the civil wars in Sudan, Liberia and Sierra Leone and there is every reason to be concerned that conditions are ripe for new conflicts to occur in many other places," cautioned Jeffrey Hatcher, director of global programs with Rights and Resources Initiative.

The non-government organization, founded in 2005 with headquarters in Washington, seeks to promote land and policy reforms in 20 African countries.

In a report published Wednesday, RRI estimates that a 500 million people in sub-Saharan Africa depend on 3.46 billion acres of communally held farmland that has been a primary target of foreign governments and investors seeking to produce food specifically for non-African populations.

In a December report, the International Land Coalition, a global network of civil society and farmers' organizations, estimated the global rush for land claimed 494 million acres in sub-Saharan Africa in 2000-10.

ILC zeroed in on West Africa, where it said land acquisitions by foreign entities were causing major environmental and agricultural damage along the River Niger, at 2,265 miles the third longest river in Africa after the Nile and the Congo.

"The siphoning of water for huge areas of farmland will worsen the already low water levels of the Niger," it said. The result was a "50 percent diminution of the delta flood plain's land area."

It concluded, "Given that social conflict over resources between farmers and pastoralists has always been a feature of the Niger Basin, the Coalition suggests that large-scale irrigation could heighten tension between local and downstream water users."

On Jan. 20, two Liberian land campaigners wrote in The New York Times that the government of President [Ellen Johnson Sirleaf](#), co-winner of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize, was likely "sowing the seeds of future conflict by handing over huge tracts of land to foreign investors and dispossessing rural Liberians."

They alleged that in 2006-11, Sirleaf "granted more than a third of Liberia's land to private investors to use for logging, mining and agro-industrial enterprises.

"Today, more than 7 million acres have become forestry and agricultural concessions," they said.

Some 1.6 million acres went to the Sime Darby Corp. of Malaysia and Golden Veroleum, a subsidiary of the New York's Verdant Fund L.P.

Local communities in the region, where 150,000 of the 1 million people will be disposed without being consulted or compensated by their government, have temporarily blocked the Malaysian company's plans to plant oil palms on 523,800 acres of land leased from the Freetown government.

The company has reportedly frozen its operations following an appeal to the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, an international certification body.

These land grabs were triggered by the 2007-08 world food price crisis, with countries like oil-rich Saudi Arabia and South Korea buying or leasing vast tracts of land in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

They planned to grow food there that would be exclusively exported to their own populations, with none of it going to the people of famine-plagued Africa.

Many of the land agreements in African states involve under-the-table deals with high-ranking officials who enrich themselves at the expense of peasants and villagers who have farmed these lands for generations.

The lack of secure land tenure has facilitated "an astonishing buying spree across Africa," Hatcher observed.

In a comprehensive review of land rights and reforms in 35 African states, his group reported that only nine included protections for those using the land without formal legal title.

David Deng of the Law Society of South Sudan said that infant state -- it only became independent in July after decades of civil war -- was already being hit by foreign land grabs, with the government unable to monitor all the transactions.

"I think it's fairly clear to us that poorly planned investments can contribute to conflict, particularly in fragile, post-conflict states," he said.

"But conflict can also attract investment, as opportunistic companies come to take advantage of power vacuums, and in the case of South Sudan, of a massive transfer of wealth to a bureaucratically weak government."

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