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Arrests and Harassment of Community Leaders in Liberia Must Stop

Recent Punitive Actions Undermine the Legitimacy of 300,000+ Hectare Acquisition by Golden Veroleum (Liberia)

WASHINGTON, D.C. (20 December, 2012)—Four community leaders in Sinoe County, Liberia have been arrested by local authorities over the past few days, calling into question the government's commitment to protecting the rights of the country's indigenous communities. The arrests came after the community met with an international journalist to discuss how they lost their homes and cropland to Golden Veroleum (Liberia) (also known as GVL) for a 350,149 hectare oil palm plantation.

“As the eyes of the international community are drawn again to yet another conflict in Liberia, local authorities need to stop the punitive arrests and extralegal harassment,” said Andy White, coordinator of the Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI). “We are deeply disappointed at the lack of response by the national government, which has promised to protect citizen rights, yet has allocated over half the lands in the country to industries, often without the consent of the landowners.”

“There is an urgent need for a moratorium on GVL's land acquisitions and an independent assessment of the crisis in Sinoe,” White added. “To its credit, the government has recently prepared a new land policy that would recognize and clarify the land rights of local people. This crisis highlights the importance of the Liberian government's rapid action on this policy.”

Sinoe County police arrested Butaw community members Calvin Bloh, Dexter Gleeka, and Anna Tue without charge on Friday, 14 December, but released them the following day, according to Alfred Brownell, the community's legal advisor. Benedict Manewah, another community member who lost his home to the GVL plantation, has been arrested this week without a warrant or formal charges filed. He has not been released yet.

“What is taking place on the ground in Liberia mirrors a similar situation in Cameroon and many other countries, where local authorities side with national or international corporations to seize the communal lands of indigenous communities,” noted White. “Tragically, these affected communities would greatly appreciate economic development as long as it respects their land rights and does not decimate their livelihoods. There are plenty of examples in the world where corporations have done so and maintained profitable operations and good community relations.”

Liberia's government, led by President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, has come under increasing scrutiny for land deals that ignore the rights and tenure of its poorest citizens. A [recent report](#) by the United Nations Panel of Experts on Liberia to the Security Council, for example, found that land conflicts created problems across agricultural and logging concessions and permits, and focused particularly on the case of GVL.

Last month, the Malaysian company Sime Darby suspended operations at a separate 311,319 hectare concession for a palm oil plantation in Grand Cape Mount County in response to similar complaints. The pressure to respond to the complaints came not from the Liberian government, but from the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), an international trade association whose members include GVL, Golden-Agri Resources Limited (a major investor of GVL), Sime Darby, PepsiCo, Con-Agra, General Mills and Nestle (which [just committed](#) to purchasing palm oil from plantations that “respect the free prior and informed consent of local and indigenous communities”).

In the [Liberian communities' complaint to the RSPO](#), they stated: “We are living under constant fear of threats, harassments, intimidation and arrest because we have refused permission for Golden Veroleum to take away our customary lands left to us by our ancestors.”

“These tragedies will continue as long as national governments keep handing out community lands, and are silent when their own laws are not respected,” White concluded. “These are communities with very little except for the land under their feet. And even that is being taken away in the remote corners of the world where no one is standing guard on their behalf.”

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The Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI) is a global coalition of international, regional, and community organizations advancing forest tenure, policy, and market reforms. RRI leverages the strategic collaboration and investment of its Partners and Collaborators around the world by working together on research, advocacy, and convening strategic actors to catalyze change on the ground. RRI is coordinated by the Rights and Resources Group, a non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C. For more information, please visit www.rightsandresources.org.