

## **Stop land grabbing by SOCFIN in Sierra Leone! Stop the criminalisation of land rights defenders!**

**One month after violent incidents in the SOCFIN plantations in Sierra Leone leading to brutal repression by security forces, the death of two people and 15 people arrested, Sierra Leonean and international civil society organisations urge the government of Sierra Leone and the company to immediately end the repression of land rights defenders and the human rights violations and abuses suffered by local communities.**

Since 2011 the multinational company SOCFIN has acquired more than 18,000 hectares of land for an industrial palm oil plantation in the Malen Chiefdom (Pujehun district, Southern Sierra Leone). Since then, a land conflict has raged between SOCFIN, the local authorities and the communities.

The conflict recently escalated to new levels of violence. On January 21<sup>st</sup>, following a skirmish between community people and the police and military protecting the assets of SOCFIN, two people were shot dead. Shortly after, police and military raids were carried out in the surrounding villages. People were beaten, houses were vandalised and properties were looted. Hundreds of people fled their homes. The police also arrested 15 people, adding to a long list of arbitrary arrests and judicial harassment committed against land rights activists of the community based organisation MALOA (Malen Land Owners and Users Association).

One month after these tragic events, the human rights organisation FIAN Belgium is publishing a new report entitled “*Land Grabbing for Palm Oil in Sierra Leone: Analysis of the SOCFIN Case from a Human Rights Perspective*”. The report provides an in-depth analysis of SOCFIN's activities in Sierra Leone and shows how the company, with the assistance of national and local elites, has seriously impaired the communities from enjoying their human rights. Several issues emerged including the rights to land, food, water and a healthy environment, as well as workers' rights, women's rights, the rights of the elderly and the right to education. The report also points to serious allegations of corruption and a lack of transparency. It shows that huge amounts of money, which should be allocated to the land owners as rent payments, were instead provided by SOCFIN to local elites without any transparency on how those funds were used. Furthermore, the report reveals huge gaps between the promises made by SOCFIN, as part of their corporate social responsibility action plan, and the reality on the ground: between 2011 and 2017, of the 16,433,375 USD announced by SOCFIN (for buildings, roads, schools, hospitals, an out-grower scheme and other community spendings) only 2,583,784 USD were actually disbursed.

Since SOCFIN began its operations communities opposed to its land deal have been systematically criminalised, culminating with last month's tragic events, and hundreds of land rights defenders have faced arbitrary arrests and judicial harassment. Fifteen persons are still in detention at the Freetown Central Prison at the moment.

Against this background, a coalition of thirty-four Sierra Leoneans and international CSOs urgently demands that the state of Sierra Leone:

- immediately release the land rights activists from Malen who are still in jail (unless there is convincing evidence that they have committed crimes), terminate all forms of criminalisation and ensure the protection of human rights defenders;
- address the issue of the internally displaced persons from the Chiefdom by identifying and registering them in their present locations and providing the needed relief;
- redress the human rights violations and abuses suffered by the Malen communities, hold SOCFIN and other responsible actors accountable, and find a long-lasting solution to the conflict. As a first step, MALOA calls upon the government (with the support of the international community) to initiate an independent and thorough investigation of the case, which should be carried out by human rights experts and whose results should inform the measures to be taken to redress all abuses and violations.

In addition, CSOs call for the international community (including African Union and UN agencies, EU external action service, SOCFIN's home states and other partner states of Sierra Leone) to:

- take active steps to ensure the protection of the human rights defenders, including close monitoring of the situation of the imprisoned persons and the situation of Malen communities, as well as providing necessary support to human rights defenders;
- use all tools at their disposal to ensure that SOCFIN respect human rights, carry out human rights due diligence, assumes liability and is held accountable for all abuses related to its operations in Sierra Leone;
- cooperate and use all available means of diplomacy in order to redress the human rights violations and abuses and find a long-lasting solution to the conflict that is based on the rights and needs of Malen communities.

Our coalition is also extremely concerned about the human rights situation of communities affected by SOCFIN's operations in Liberia as detailed in a new report also released today entitled "Struggle for Life and Land – Socfin's Rubber Plantations in Liberia and the Responsibility of Swiss Companies"

**List of signatories:**

<b>Name of the organisation</b>	<b>Country</b>
<b>CSOs in Sierra Leone</b>	
Amnesty international - Sierra Leone	Sierra Leone
Green Scenery	Sierra Leone
Human Rights Defenders Network-SL	Sierra Leone
Mankind's Activities for Development Accreditation Movement (MADAM)	Sierra Leone
Network Movement for Justice and Development	Sierra Leone
Sierra Leone Network on the Right to Food (SiLNoRF)	Sierra Leone
<b>African and International CSOs</b>	
Action Solidarité Tiers Monde	Luxembourg
AEFJN	International
AEFJN antenne belge	Belgique
Association Française d'Amitié et de Solidarité avec les Peuples d'Afrique (AFASPA)	France
CNCD-11.11.11	Belgium
Convergence Globale des Luttés pour la Terre et l'Eau - Guinée	Guinea
Convergence Globale des Luttés pour la Terre et l'Eau Ouest Africaine	Coordination Regionale
COPAGEN	Côte d'Ivoire
Ecumenical Association for Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development (ECASARD)	Ghana
Enda Pronat	Sénégal
Entraide et Fraternité	Belgium
FIAN Belgium	Belgium
FIAN Germany	Germany
FIAN International	International
FIAN Switzerland	Switzerland
FIDH dans le cadre de l'Observatoire pour la protection des défenseurs des droits de l'Homme	International
Ghana National Convergence Platform of CGLTE-OA	Ghana
GRAIN	International
OMCT dans le cadre de l'Observatoire pour la protection des défenseurs des droits de l'Homme	International
ONG Jeunes Volontaires pour l'Environnement (JVE) Côte d'Ivoire	Côte d'Ivoire
ReAct	France
Réseau d'information et d'appui aux ONG nationales (RIAO-RDC)	Democratic Republic of Congo
SOS Faim	Luxembourg
SOS Faim	Belgium
Synaparcam	Cameroon
SYNTAP	Burkina Faso
The Oakland Institute	International
West African Human Rights Defenders Network (ROADDH/WAHRDN)	West Africa