



## **Herakles Abandons All Operations in Mundemba And Toko Concessions Area**

*This is an update from Nasako Besingi on the ongoing corporate land grab issues in Ndian Province, Cameroon.  
This version of the update has been edited by AFJN staff with Nasako's permission.*

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Herakles Farms, a New York based agro-investment firm and its subsidiary SG Sustainable Oils Cameroon (SGSOC) is once again in the spotlight. On May 29, 2015 it announced that it has abandoned all operations in Mundemba and Toko Subdivisions in the Ndian Province. Local and international organizations continue to oppose Herakles' intention to establish oil palm plantations in the midst of significant protected areas including the iconic Korup National Park in southwest Cameroon.

The decision was announced to the few remaining workers of the Fabe, Lipenja I, and Batanga nurseries at the end of their work day. Affected workers told our organization SEFE (*Struggle to Economize Future Environment*) that the announcement was made by a white man who presented himself as the new CEO for the company with unwarranted enthusiasm. The workers said the reason for suspending operations was to enable Herakles to intensify palm planting in the Nguti area before returning to the concessions in Mundemba and Toko in 2017/2018. He blamed the current management for concentrating on timber extraction rather than planting palms. Did Herakles have the means to carryout planting and it didn't do it? This could just be a tactical excuse for a dishonorable exit from the area.

### **People are Pleased with the Closure**

Immediately after the news of the closing operations in Mundemba and Toko Subdivisions got to SEFE we sent associates to the villages Fabe and Lipenja I to get first hand reactions. In Lipenja I, the traditional chief and community facilitator for Herakles, Mr. Norbert Mbile, expressed mixed reactions. While some lamented blaming their leaders for failing them by lying, others, particularly workers, blamed SEFE while still others praised SEFE for opening their eyes.

In Fabe many people were happy with the news and praised NGOs for standing up for justice for the poor. A lot of blame was put on Mr. Blessed Okole and Mr. Daniel Agoons, Herakles supervisors, for misinforming and misleading their interests. When Herakles suspended activities on May 18, 2013, Fabe inhabitants (mostly women) responded to the news with songs of joy and

dancing. Many people in Ndian Province are against the Herakles project because they have first-hand experience with another old palm plantation in the area, PAMOL.

Reports from two villages of the Ngolo clan (Ikoti and Mobenge) say villagers are very happy with the news and also showered SEFE and other NGOs that stood by their side to free their land with praise. In both of these villages the inhabitants say they have never sat down with Herakles agents to discuss demarcation of their concession. They could barely recall the day Herakles agents came to their village and were taken to see some farms. On that day they took the agents to see the farms and at some point they stopped and returned home. Later the village saw in the paper that Herakles claims that they have leased their land to the company, a woman told SEFE during the village tour. Some weeks back the population in villages where Herakles wanted to proceed with extraction of timber, they forbade the company to continue the demarcation exercise.

### **Land Conflicts Between Villages**

Tensions and anger are very high in the Mundemba and Toko concession areas due to Herakles' unilateral decision to take land from some villages and declare it the property of other villages, obviously crossing known traditional boundaries. For example, land belonging to the villages of Loe and Esoki Batanga is named as Lipenja I Block. Also land belonging to the villages of Boso and Beleme respectively are named as Kuma Block and Beboka block. Bweme village is complaining that its land has been attributed to Mobenge village with which it shares a common boundary.

### **Workers Laid off**

Some workers were awarded certificates of appreciation and asked to go to the Provincial Office of Labour in Mundemba to receive their money. The letters handed to each of the workers did not indicate the amount of money to expect. They were left wondering if it is their wages for the month of May or compensation for the entire period they have worked without pay.

This is not the first time Herakles has laid off their workers without due compensation. On May 18, 2013, when the government suspended the activities of Herakles, the company laid off over 500 workers without paying their wages.

Some of the workers who spoke to SEFE say they are disheartened with the decision because they were recently just recalled to work and just been laid off again a few days later. Last week the company laid off its managers and personnel at the Limbe office. Among those dismissed is Daniel Agoons, the Community Relations Manager who thought community relations meant telling lies and misrepresenting the views of the community.

### **Embezzlement of Workers' Money**

Some of the worker's pay slips show that the company has been deducting insurance contribution from their wages. However, Herakles never registered these workers with the

National Social Insurance Fund and have no insurance identification numbers even though some claimed to have been working for 4 years. An official of the National Social Insurance Fund in Mundemba confirmed that Herakles has not registered a single worker in their office. Add to that he informed SEFE that his office has requested the company to register its workers to no avail. Now, the question is where has all the money deducted from the workers' wages gone for all these years?

### **The Culture of Deception within Herakles**

In a meeting in April 2013 Herakles told investors it was going to sell the 73,000 hectares (ha) concession in 2018. But a Presidential decree signed in November 2013 granted the company 19,843 ha of land for a 3-year probationary lease. The decree required the company to fulfill certain conditions which have been not been met, namely the development of social programs, repeat of the Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) in the new concession and payment of land lease of 200,000,000 FCFA

Treasury officials as well as local council officials have confirmed to SEFE that Herakles has not yet paid land lease required by the Presidential decree of November 2013, and is in clear violation of the decree by continuing to operate in the area.

### **Herakles' Bad Project in the Wrong Place**

It should be recalled that the Mundemba and Toko concessions are located astride the Iconic Korup National Park and Rumpi Hills Forest Reserve. The latter is a complex watershed formation from which freshwater drains into the Korup Park. Hence, establishing a huge palm oil plantation in this area will undoubtedly affect the health of animals in Korup Park and use of pesticides, fertilizers and herbicides will certainly pollute the water in the park. It will be good to carry out some studies now on the undisturbed water within this area before the start of the project and then after the project kicks off in order to scientifically show the affects of the project of the water. Clearly, this project should not be established in the first place. To SEFE it is a foregone conclusion that the Herakles project is simply a bad project in the wrong place.

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