

EMBARGOED UNTIL 12:00 PM GMT (MONROVIA, LIBERIA) AND 8:00 AM EST (BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS)

22 Liberian Indigenous communities accuse the Salala Rubber Corporation (SRC), a Subsidiary of SOCFIN, a transnational corporation based in Luxemburg and an International Finance Corporation (IFC) Client, of grave human rights and environmental abuses using World Bank financing.

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Kakata City, Liberia, May 27th, 2019 – In a complaint filed today, 22 Liberian indigenous villagers say, the [Salala Rubber Corporation \(SRC\)](#) is using World Bank money to expand and operate its Liberian plantations through illegal land grabs, sexual violence, and intimidation of human rights defenders, according to a complaint filed today. Residents of 22 Indigenous Villages in Margibi and Bong Counties are asking the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the World Bank’s private-sector arm, to intercede and take special steps to protect community based Land, Environmental and Human Rights Defenders from harm and reprisals as a result of their complaints consistent with the [IFC October 2018 Position Statement](#) on Retaliation Against Civil Society and Project Stakeholders..

SRC, a Liberian subsidiary of Luxembourg-based agricultural giant [Socfin](#), took over the Weala Rubber Company in 2007, after the end of Liberia’s civil war. SRC received an IFC loan in 2008 to expand and modernize its rubber plantations. But according to villagers, that expansion has undermined their livelihoods and has been accompanied by violence against women and community leaders. The company has forcibly taken over traditional territory and even lands for which locals hold formal title deeds, without regard for land rights and without compensating the owners. One resident explained, “Our ancestors resided upon these lands before the Republic of Liberia even existed.” But now many villages are surrounded by plantation, their farmlands and forests cleared and engulfed by rubber trees.

Without the farmland or the forest, communities have entered a period of food scarcity. “When I was a child, our parents fed us three times per day. We had plenty of land for farming, and we grew enough food to feed the family and sell some for profit,” one woman said. “The forest was used for hunting, medicine, and rivers for catching fish. Now I can only feed my two children once per day.” SRC also sprays pesticides and other chemicals around the villages, polluting sources of water. Community members report that their water sources including creeks, rivers and streams have changed color, smell foul, and often cause rashes and diarrhea when imbibed soon after rounds of

spraying. They also complained that their sacred sites – tombs, shrines, Sande (women traditional schools and universities) and Poro (male traditional schools and universities) and areas of forest reserved for medicinal plants and religious activities – have been destroyed and desecrated.

Living near SRC's plantations [brings other perils](#) as well. The few women who find employment with the company are subject to harassment by the contractor heads who manage them; they often face demands for sex just to receive payment that is due to them. Women who walk through the plantations at night – often a necessity because villages are literally surrounded by rubber trees – fear running into plantation guards, who humiliate them and threaten them with rape. Activists and community leaders who voice their opposition to the company or seek redress for the damages have been arrested and their legitimate grievances criminalized on spurious charges and put under continuous surveillance. The communities' complaint asks the IFC to take special steps to protect these organizers, land, environmental and human rights defenders from harm.

In January 2019, a Swiss organization, Bread for All, [published a detailed report](#) revealing the abuses and impacts on communities of SRC's operations, but the company has yet to respond. Frustrated with this failure to address their concerns, the communities have directed their complaints toward the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman (CAO), an office of the IFC that investigates allegations that IFC-funded projects are in breach of IFC's own strict social and environmental safeguard policies.

[Green Advocates International](#), the Liberian organization filing the complaint and supporting the Indigenous communities, hopes the IFC complaint will have a better outcome. "SRC has harmed these communities on such a massive scale that the IFC must compel the SRC to remedy these abuses and make them whole again. The IFC has a duty, an obligation and a responsibility to protect, respect and fulfill the rights of these indigenous villagers.," says Alfred Lahai Gbabai Brownell Sr, the Lawyer representing the indigenous communities and the 2019 Goldman Prize Winner, Lead Campaigner and Founder of Green Advocates International. "With the interventions of the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman (CAO), we hope the IFC will hold SRC accountable for its actions. This would be an important and sizable symbolic victory for all of our impacted communities that have continuously suffered these abuses for almost half a century without and form of remedy IT IS TIME to hold the IFC, SOCFIN and its subsidiary, the SRC fully accountable." Says Brownell

Green Advocates International

[Green Advocates International](#) is Liberia's first public interest environmental law and human rights organization dedicated to ensuring the protection of the environment, defending human rights, empowering and amplifying the voices of poor people who are victimized in resource exploitation and by using the rule of law to hold state and non-state actors accountable for their actions. The program activities of Green Advocates are conceptualized to amplify environmental protection, a transparent and accountable system of governance in natural resources management to benefit indigenous people who are the custodians of natural resources, the intellectual and cultural rights of rural people, and the link to the protection of the human rights of marginalize people.

Quotations from Affected Community Members

“Human rights defenders in the communities have been systematically targeted by the IFC’s client, SRC, as a result of their activities in seeking redress for legitimate grievances regarding SRC’s activities, and are continuously surveilled by local police and SRC’s private security contractors”

- Says Francis K. Colee, Head of Programs Green Advocates

“During the SRC expansions in the 1960s and 1979/80, many of us were forced to evacuate to indigenous tribal ‘reserve land.’ Once we were evicted from the reserve land, we had nowhere to go. The government knew we were there, we paid taxes.” An elderly male member of the community

“SRC cleared sacred places such as our traditional revered snake bushes, Sande bush, Poro bush, taboo trees, sacred rivers, ritual lands, and ancestral graves while expanding its rubber plantation. We used snake bushes to cure those bitten by snakes. SRC destroyed many of these sites during the clearing of the bush or the demolition of towns.”

- Youth leader from the community

“Our ancestors resided upon these lands before the Republic of Liberia even existed. Now SRC’s expansion is making our entire way of life impossible to continue.” An elderly male member of the community

“When I was a child, our parents fed us three times each day. They had plenty of land for farming and grew enough food to feed the family and sell some for profit. The forest was used for hunting, medicine, and rivers for catching fish. Now I can only feed my two children once per day.”

- An Indigenous women leader

“The same bulldozers which destroyed farmlands have also demolished many graveyards, or cut the them off from the surrounding forest, robbing them of spiritual value. We can no longer honor our ancestors.” A chief from one of the villages

“We now must use water from the creek in the swamp within the plantation, even though the water is unsuitable to drink.”

Another women leader

“If a woman travels after 6 (six) PM in the evening, she can expect to get raped.”

- Woman land rights defender

“SRC has harmed our communities on such a massive scale that making us whole again could prove to be impossible.”

- A young female Land Rights Defender