
[Liberia: Lawsuit against Firestone for slavery and child labor on rubber plantations](#)

On November 2005, the International Labor Rights Fund (ILRF) filed an Alien Tort Claims Act case in US District Court in California against the rubber company Bridgestone alleging "forced labor, the modern equivalent of slavery" on the Firestone Plantation in Harbel, Liberia, of which Bridgestone is a partner.

"The Plantation workers allege, among other things, that they remain trapped by poverty and coercion on a frozen-in-time Plantation operated by Firestone in a manner identical to how the Plantation was operated when it was first opened by Firestone in 1926," states the lawsuit. Still worse, conditions have actually deteriorated since that date.

The million-acre plantation was established that year when Harvey Firestone secured a 99-year lease on the land in exchange for a \$5 million soft loan to help the Liberian government repay debt to the US. The land, in fact, was originally owned and inhabited by the Mamba Bassa tribes who were evicted from their homeland by the company and the Government of Liberia without benefits to these local inhabitants (see WRM Bulletin N° 94).

ILRF executive director Terry Collingsworth filed the suit in the name of 12 Liberian workers and their 23 children, who remain anonymous to protect themselves from reprisal.

Liberian Emira Woods, a researcher from the Institute for Policy Studies, reported on the conditions at the Firestone Plantation. According to Collingsworth, "the strengths of the case are, unfortunately, the extreme human rights violations on the plantation --child labor is everywhere and adult forced labor is the norm."

Also bolstering the case is a November 2005 CNN International interview with Dan Admonitis, president of a Firestone subsidiary, in which he discusses workers' daily tree-tapping quota. "Each tapper will tap about 650 trees a day where they spent perhaps a couple of minutes at each tree," stated Mr. Admonitis. "Six hundred and fifty trees a day, at two minutes per tree, it's 1,300 minutes, or more than 21 hours of work a day," Femi Oke, the CNN host, pointed out.

Dan MacDonald, director of media relations for Bridgestone-Firestone, sought to contextualize the statement of Mr. Admonitis, pointing out that "a couple of minutes" is "a figure of speech." Mr. MacDonald explained that the workers tap the trees in the morning and then return in the afternoon to collect the latex, meaning they must visit each of the 650 trees twice. "Most tappers work a seven to eight hour day," Mr. MacDonald said. "The daily quota is enough for a living wage."

An eight hour day has 480 minutes in which to visit 650 trees twice, in addition to other required tasks such as cleaning the taps, applying pesticides and fertilizers to the trees, and carrying 75-pound buckets of latex to collection points up to a mile away--all for \$3.19 a day. The lawsuit (which contends that the current 650-tree daily quota "is not true" and places the real number much higher) notes that conditions have actually deteriorated since 1926, citing a 1956 study reporting a daily

quota of 250-300 trees and a 1979 daily quota of 400-500 trees.

"With no technological increases and yet a quota two to four times higher than previous reports, the system today requires that each tapper, to meet his daily quota, find one or more unpaid 'helpers,'" the suit states. "Of course the only helpers available under those terms are the tappers' own children." "The overseers and supervisors at the Firestone Plantation not only know this, they encourage and require it," it adds. "Perhaps in anticipation of this lawsuit, in early September 2005, the Firestone Plantation issued a directive that child labor will no longer be permitted on the Plantation."

Mr. MacDonald rebutted this claim. "We've had a policy in place for many years against child labor--there are strict guidelines forbidding the use of children as laborers," he said. "We did put out a policy directive because we wanted to reiterate and reaffirm the policy that is in place because we want people to know exactly what the guidelines and expectations are."

Mr. Collingsworth, who expects the company to formally respond in court within two weeks, sums up his opinion of the case succinctly. "This case shows, in the age of public relations, codes of conduct, and 'socially responsible' business, what a major multinational will do if it can get away with it," he said.

Based on the article "Alien Tort Claims Act Lawsuit Alleges Slavery and Child Labor on Liberian Firestone Plantation, by William Baue, SocialFunds.com, December 30, 2005, News and Press, http://www.laborrights.org/press/Firestone/socialfunds_123005.htm