
Cameroon: Local women besieged by the military, guardians of the palm oil plantations of SOCAPALM

A woman from the village of Mbonjo 1, Cameroon, which has witnessed the impact of industrial palm oil plantations and the constant presence of the military, calls for international solidarity and protection of right to life and freedom.

The SOCAPALM company, part of the multinational agri-food group SOCFIN (1), has been hiring security guards for its palm oil plantations in Dibombari in south-west Cameroon to prevent local people from harvesting palm nuts. Security companies initially were tasked with policing the plantations. However, **the local population has increasingly witnessed the presence of soldiers, whose interventions have been compared to those observed in war zones.**

One woman living close to the plantations offers her testimony of how women have experienced the abuse of military personnel under the complicit gaze of village leaders.

People have become prisoners in their own villages

"When you want to lock up your house, you find yourself face-to-face with armed men: what are they searching for?"

"There are armed men everywhere"

"Everywhere people are being attacked, beaten, all of that"

Such is the daily life in the village of Mbonjo 1 according to the women who live next to the palm oil plantations of SOCAPALM in Dibombari, Cameroon. This situation led around 20 women to gather on 29 January 2018 and complain to the head of their community that they were tired of the presence of armed guards and soldiers in their town and the plantations that surround it.

"It's not just SOCAPALM that's taken over our land; there are armed soldiers everywhere."

The soldiers have been in our town since 8 December 2017. The women of Mbonjo 1 understand that they are tasked with policing the plantations of SOCAPALM, but we don't want these soldiers behind our houses and inside our kitchens. **Security forces have been beating women and young people, threatening them about the palm nuts, and if that wasn't enough, they linger around behind the women's kitchens.** There is no longer any privacy in Mbonjo 1 because of the military. Instead of guarding the palm nuts in SOCAPALM's plantations, the soldiers spend their time in the town, forcing themselves on women and young people. They have never provided proof that they are authorized to search people's houses, break down doors or attack local people. Their presence has made life in the town very tense, because the soldiers are abusing their power.

"When we're asleep at night, the soldiers enter our homes. Are there palm trees in our houses? The palm groves are on the hillsides, not inside our homes. That's why we gathered in

*front of the chief's house, but he just threw us out. He didn't offer us a warm welcome. **The soldiers are everywhere, everywhere.** What did we do in Mbonjo 1? You want to lock up your home but the soldiers are there, armed. What do they want from us?"*

At the moment the women of Mbonjo 1 only have unanswered questions with respect to the presence of the military. They are helpless, without any solutions or information about what's happening to them.

The soldiers' actions frequently take place without any formal authorization that gives them permission to infiltrate our living space without any justification. We still want and aspire to a less stressful environment and living conditions. We didn't choose to be born in Mbonjo 1- it is just our bad luck. It's like a curse. But we still believe we can change this situation and we're determined to do so. That's why we went to see the village chief.

Soldiers who believe they can do what they want

The vast majority of women in this community are afraid of the military. We know that it will be difficult for us to win our fight against these men in uniform. And they're well aware that **any act of violence they commit against us, our children and our husbands will go unpunished.** They're not even worried. They'll soon be transferred somewhere else and will continue to engage in this behavior because they have the **full support of the company.**

Women recognize the power of the company because **court rulings in favor of abused women have never been implemented.** An infamous example is that of a woman who lost her baby when she suffered a miscarriage after SOCAPALM guards beat her. That happened six years ago. In the court of Mbanga, a favorable ruling was handed down to the woman, but SOCAPALM appealed and the case continues in a court in Douala, the economic capital of Cameroon. The next hearing is on 23 March 2018.

Passive village chiefs

"We did not come for the war. We came for peace. But there is already a war between the chief and us, the women of Mbonjo 1."

"We wanted our father's help and that's why we came to see our father; we want peace. But he threw us out. "

This behavior surprised the locals. The women had sought the village chief to find answers to their questions. Sadly, he didn't receive them. Another disappointment that these women must face is that they have no idea who to turn to or how to proceed.

We expected the village chief to listen to the women and defend them. His mission is to protect his people. But he didn't even listen to what we had to say. How is it possible for a chief to see 20 women in front of his house and not even try to understand the reasons for their presence?

More and more village chiefs are benefiting from the assistance of SOCAPALM. In turn, these chiefs take actions that are detrimental to their local people. Their attitude makes us believe that the chiefs are on the side of the others. They act in collusion with the company and let their people die. This self-centeredness also generates a greater gap between the local populations and the company, because those who should act as intermediaries don't receive or communicate the

complaints of their people, in order to find valid solutions for both sides to obtain peace and sustainable development.

This action underlines the deep malaise that SOCAPALM has generated and maintains in our local communities. **Women have become prisoners in their own village, where they constantly feel afraid.**

They grabbed our lands to exploit them. SOCAPALM needs to respect our privacy in our homes. We're tired of all this abuse by the security forces, affecting both ourselves and our families. We feel alone and abandoned. We fight the best we can to make our environment livable. **We call for solidarity to be shown beyond the limits of our village. This is a cry of alarm that we raise to safeguard our right to life, our freedom. Although we are forced to suffer hunger and are condemned to poverty, we do not accept that they even take away our freedom. That's all we have left.**

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****** Read more about the impact of SOCAPALM on the village of Mbonjo: "Land grab in Mbonjo village, Cameroon displaces population and disrespects ancestral burial grounds," article written by Jaff Bamenjo, coordinator for RELUFA, *Joining Hands Cameroon*:
<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/together-justice/2017/12/06/palm-plantation-invades-ancestral-lands/>

(1) In 1968, the government of Cameroon created SOCAPALM, the national palm oil company. It was privatized in 2000 and sold to the SOCFIN Group, an agrifood multinational controlled by the Belgian family Fabri (50.2% of shares) and the French group Bolloré (39% of shares). To learn more about the impacts of SOCFIN plantations in Africa please

see: <https://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section1/socfins-plantations-in-africa-many-places-of-violence-and-destruction/>