



Herakles' nursery at Fabe reduced to prorning and sales of over matured palm seedlings. Photo/SEFE 12/2014

Unilateral Boundary Demarcation by Herakles Farms Causes Tensions in Mundemba Subdivision, Cameroon.

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SEFE/report/field updates

On Monday, April 12, 2015, the people of Mokange village in Mundemba subdivision spotted

unidentified persons conducting land demarcations of their forest. This information was conveyed to SEFE by the proposed chief of Mokange and two elites who informed SEFE of the presence of some 30 persons working for Herakles Farms who had come to the Talangaye area.

After spotting the people demarcating the forest, the villagers quickly contacted the Divisional Officer (D.O) for Mundemba, who told the people that his office was not aware of the exercise. As tensions heightened, the company dispatched its Community Relations Manager, Daniel Agoons, to the concerned villages to appease the population. Danial Agoons is said to have visited the following villages: Mokange , Monday April 13, 2015, Lipenja II, Tuesday April 14, 2015, Kuma, Wednesday April 15, 2015, and Esoki Bima, Thursday April 16, 2015.

In all four villages, Agoons made apologies to the people on behalf of Herakles Farms for demarcating their lands without consulting or informing them. He also disclosed that Herakles Farms has had difficult times and is almost on the brink of collapse following the withdrawal of investors and the refusal of new investors to invest in their palm project. He added that Herakles Farms has only survived thanks to its partnership with Unic Province, a timber exploitation company. But he did not inform the local people that Unic Province is solely owned by Herakles for the purpose of exploiting and exporting timber to raise money for its palm oil project.

Agoons was accompanied to these villages by Mbangé Lovett, a staff of Herakles Farms. They carried eight crates of beer to each village which they dispersed to the people they met in the villages before speaking to them. Agoons further told the villagers that Herakles Farms will assist them to develop at least 5 hectares of oil palms plantations, and that the felling of trees for those plantations would be done by Unic Province. Herakles Farms, he said, would supply them with the palm seedlings in the form of loans that can be paid after six years from the time of planting.

Herakles Farms had previously promised to pay the villagers 50,000 frs per month, starting in 2010, following the signing of MoUs with chiefs and supporters. But they have still not started making these payments. Agoons told the villagers that these amounts will be paid as arrears without specifying when they would be made.

Agoons surprised the villagers by saying that Herakles Farms started paying the sum of 50,000 frs into the bank accounts of each village in the concession area since January 2015. He then handed an ECObank check booklet to the chief of Esoki saying there is one hundred and fifty thousand (150,000) francs CFA already in the village account, based on payments of 50,000 francs for January, February and March 2015.

The villagers were shocked by this information and questioned the authenticity of the bank accounts referred to by Agoons since they had never met with Herakles officials to discuss the opening of the said bank accounts. The villagers questioned why Herakles was only now providing checks when they want to extract timber and after the villagers' protests. This was the first time the villagers had heard of these bank account, a woman from the village told SEFE.

The villagers also wondered who were the signatories to these bank accounts and they were concerned that the signatures might have been falsified. In fact, some people who confirmed they are signatories of the bank accounts which was constituted during the illegal land consultative board meeting that took in June 2013, told SEFE that they had never had their signatures appended on any Ecobank contact form. Moreover, the fact that the check booklets were given only to the four villages that are earmarked for the exploitation of timber has heightened concerns that it is meant to lure support from the villagers

something that had a boomerang effect on the image of the company as many consider it to be an act of bribery.

In Esoki village, the villagers mobilised and stopped Herakles Farms workers from advancing with the demarcation exercise. They were angry that the workers were unidentified and that the land being demarcated was close to the village and went beyond the area of land that the company had previously been allocated. When one woman asked Agoons what would be left for their children if the company took these lands, Agoons got angry and said that the question was taking them backwards instead of forwards and hence he did not reply to it.

On April 16, 15 Herakles workers went back to the field to continue with the demarcation but were stopped by angry villagers who said they were not satisfied with Agoons' presentation and explanation. That day, Agoons phoned the chief of Esoki and told him that he had been informed by workers who came to demarcate the land that a day after he left Esoki the villagers again threatened the workers and that, as a result, the demarcation work was brought to a halt.

The Chief of Esoki went to the village to consult with his subjects following the phone call from Daniel Agoons. But he was unable to quell the anger of the villagers who claimed they had no knowledge of Unic Province and Herakles and needed time to better know these companies whose activities they say will negatively impact their wellbeing.

“Since the Herakles people started coming to our village they have never giving prior information to us of any meeting. It seems their plan is to hold unannounced meetings so that we can make foolish decisions to their advantage. Despite several appeals to them to notify the village of any meeting and its agenda at least a month before the meeting so that we can consult experts to advise us but they have refused to yield to our appeals”, lamented a youth of Esoki village. He added that they will continue to defend their right to land and livelihoods despite the odds.

Due to the tense situation in the area, and in Esoki village in particular, the Divisional Officer for Mundemba Subdivision intends to visit Esoki Bima to get first hand knowledge of the situation on the ground. The situation is unfolding at a time when Herakles Farms has failed to respect the presidential decree and the terms designated to it, namely to pay the departmental treasury in Mundemba the sum of 53,000,000 frs and 12,000,000 frs for land in Mundemba and Toko respectively.

On April 20, the chief of Esoki Village came to the office of SEFE for the first time following the tension in his village between his people and the workers of Herakles who were carrying out the demarcation of land. He told SEFE that Herakles was now asking for 3000 hectares, beyond the 620 hectares that was giving them by the presidential decrees.

The company claims that the 620 hectare is not enough for them since they have to remove waterways and hills. They say that with the 3000 hectares, with the exclusion of high value coservation areas, hills and waterways, this will provide them with sufficient land. The chief said he was very surprised that Herakles was asking for more land and had even gone to his village without notifying him and were already demarcating large expanses of land. He said he was grateful that the education given to his village by SEFE had enabled the village to act promptly to stop Herakles from continuing with the demarcation exercise. He said that he has come to reason now that Herakles was never in the interest of the people but was only interested in its own profits and he said there is no way the company will get the 3000 hectares they are seeking.

It is worth noting that the 2013 presidential decrees attributing land to Herakles clearly stated that the company cannot renegotiate for land beyond the limit of what has been allocated to them by the decrees. The chief also acknowledged that the village does not have the capacity to negotiate with the highly skilled personnel of Herakles and asked for assistance from SEFE saying that they do not have proper information about Herakles and the projects the company is planning in Esoki. He then requested for help from SEFE for the production of a map of Esoki village.

The chief of Ndiba village, Divine Moto (once a pro Herakles supporter) told SEFE that there is tension over Herakles' current concession because the company has encroached onto land belonging to other villages not named in the decrees of 2013. He told SEFE there was a need to identify the limits of each village in order to avoid a looming crisis. He expressed shock and dismay with the attitude of Herakles in its unilateral demarcation of land without the knowledge and consultation of the concerned villages.

In Lipenja II Village, the villagers and elites described the situation as unfortunate and disgusting because the man (a pro Herakles supporter) that Herakles is dealing with in Lipenja II is not a chief of the village and they would consider the handing of the ECObank check booklet to him and any negotiations between Herakles and him as not legitimate and risky for the company. The people of Lipenja II currently do not have a chief and are in the process of getting a new chief after the death of Chief Masumbe three years ago.

One elite told SEFE that the people of Lipenja II Village have come to realise that the person signing documents on their behalf is an impostor and that Herakles Farms was creating confusion by backing and fortifying him in the ongoing chieftaincy succession process. He said the decision to give land or not to give land is collective and that this has not happened since Herakles has not formally approach the village for negotiation.

A young lady from Lipenja II Village, told SEFE that the villagers are angry that Herakles Farms is going beyond the land previously allocated to it and is moving towards area of farmland and pristine forest where they gather NTFPs. She said women are excluded in talks with Herakles and therefore women have no other information about Herakles than that they want to grow palm oil plantation here which will ultimately destroy their natural resources, she added.

The villagers say the company has failed to provide them with the information needed for them to be able to make informed decisions on both the timber business and palm plantation development. It is noteworthy to mentioned here that Herakles has since presence in this has vehemently refused to conduct the FPIC process.

Chiefs who spoke to SEFE intimated that during a Land Consultative Board meeting held in Mundemba in June 2013, they were deceived into signing a report and maps produced by Herakles Farms in order to enable the company to get the land lease first and then come back for more proper negotiations. They expressed surprised that the company has just started demarcating the land without providing prior information and knowledge to the villagers in the concerned villages.

Some chiefs and elites who recently visited SEFE say that they have now come to realise that the issue of opening village bank accounts was a trick used by Herakles during the so-called Land Consultative Board Meeting to lure them to apend their signatures on the report and maps to enable Herakles to apply for land lease.

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