

Jail term for activists in Sierra Leone, trial of French journalists in Paris: critics of Bolloré silenced

A day before the start of yet another trial brought by the Bolloré Group against French journalists, organisations denounce the imprisonment on February 5th of six local community leaders affected by the investments of Socfin Agricultural Company Sierra Leone Ltd (SAC)¹, a subsidiary of Socfin, linked to Bolloré.

A year ago, Shiaka Sama was invited to Paris by the Bolloré Group to find a solution to the conflicts linked to the exploitation of plantations in Africa and Cambodia by subsidiaries of Socfin. Today, he is behind bars in Bo, the second largest city of Sierra Leone. Five other activists have also been incarcerated, after being found guilty of destroying 40 oil palm plants. The six activists, who deny the charges, are members of the Malen Affected Land Owners and Users Association (MALOA). Unless they can pay a fine ranging from 6,500 to 13,000 Euros per person, they each face five to six months in jail.

Since 2011, the SAC, a subsidiary of the Luxembourg-based holding company Socfin, has been granted 12,000 hectares of land concessions previously owned and used by thousands of farmers across 40 villages. Many protests have erupted and been repressed. Demonstrators were arrested in October 2011 and again in August 2012. Arrests took place in October 2013. On 9 December 2013, the police fired on and arrested demonstrators. On 14 January 2015, 11 people were arrested after clashes. Seven MALOA members were arrested on 8 September 2015.

The Bolloré Group retains (directly and indirectly) a 38.75% shareholding in Socfin. Bolloré committed to use its influence to resolve these land disputes. The Group received Shiaka Sama and other affected community representatives in Paris on 24 October 2014. Bolloré agreed to a second negotiating round in 2015, but this never took place.



Shiaka Sama (center) with Marie Annick Darmaillac, former Secretary-General of the Bolloré Group, on 24 October 2014

Shiaka Sama stated his fears a few days before the verdict: "Bolloré does not keep its promises to mediate, and allows Socfin to punish people instead of engaging in dialogue. In Sierra Leone, Socfin has sworn to use its influence to put us in jail for denouncing community rights abuses that they have committed in Malen."

Repression of activists in Sierra Leone, SLAPP suits in France

On 11 February 2016, journalists from Bastamag will appear in a hearing in Paris for defamation charges brought in by the Bolloré Group. The company filed a complaint following the publication of [an article](#) denouncing land grabbing and the involvement of investment funds and transnational corporations. This type of lawsuit, known as a "Strategic lawsuit against public participation" (SLAPP), follows many others filed by the Bolloré and Socfin groups against journalists and NGOs over the past years. The moral and financial pressure generated by these lawsuits hampers on freedom of expression in France and increases the power imbalance between rights defenders and journalists on the one hand and groups like Bolloré on the other.

A demonstration will take place at 5pm tomorrow in front of the 17th Chamber of the High Court of Paris to support the journalists and demand the release of the six jailed Sierra Leoneans. Communities from other

¹ Socfin Agricultural Company Sierra Leone Ltd: Socfin owns 59% of SOCFINAF, which own 85% of SAC. Source: Socfin Organisation, <http://www.socfin.com>

plantations operated by subsidiaries of Socfin will also take action in the coming days to show their solidarity and offer their moral and financial support.

More information:

- For more information about the Socfin project in Sierra Leone and local opposition in the country, a report and a video made by the Oakland Institute are available at:

<http://www.oaklandinstitute.org/land-deal-brief-socfin-land-investment-sierra-leone>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=abEdrPYgtkA>

- The article cited in the defamation lawsuit: <http://www.bastamag.net/Bollore-Credit-agricole-Louis>

- Urgent appeals by the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, a joint FIDH-OMCT programme: <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/Africa/sierra-leone/>

- Socfin, Sustainability Report 2014, <http://www.socfin.com/Files/media/News/Sustainability-report-2014-def.pdf>

Media contacts:

Sierra Leone:

Joseph Rahall (Green Scenery): jorahall@yahoo.com +23222220400 – Mobile: +23276601979

Anthony Brewah (defence counsel for MALOA): +23276610400

France:

Éloïse Maulet (ReAct): eloise.maulet@projet-react.org, +33638012594

Arthur Manet (FIDH): presse@fidh.org, +33672284294

USA:

Frédéric Mousseau (Oakland Institute): fmousseau@oaklandinstitute.org, +15105125458



Confédération Paysanne



un programme conjoint



fidh

L'Observatoire pour la
Protection des Défenseurs
des Droits de l'Homme



International Alliance
Of Local Communities



Réseau Foi & Justice
Afrique - Europe

Africa Europe Faith
& Justice Network

Antenne France



re
act

réseaux pour l'action collective transnationale