

Civil Society Organizations Oil Palm Working Group (CSO-OPWG)

*Press release/ August 6, 2018
Monrovia, Liberia*

Golden Veroleum Liberia voluntary withdrawal from the international palm oil certification scheme, the RSPO, highlights the need for clear national policies, laws and regulations that recognize, formalize and strengthen communities land rights in Liberia.

The Civil Society Oil Palm Working Group of Liberia says it is utterly disappointed and alarmed at Golden Veroleum Liberia's (GVL) decision to withdraw from the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO). The company's decision was communicated to the group in a letter dated 20th July 2018.¹

The company's decision reflects a lack of commitment to fully abide by Liberian law, respect human rights and protect the environment. "The action of GVL might violate Article 16 of its contract with the Government of Liberia, which requires it to be in compliance with the Principles of the RSPO. By refusing to abide by Article 16, the company might be in breach of its environmental and human rights' obligation" the CSO-OPWG said in its statement. "The Financiers of GVL need to ensure that the company fully abides by its contract with the Government of Liberia and to fully respect the land and environmental rights of Liberians", the statement concluded.

The CSO-OPWG acknowledges the RSPO's decision and its efforts to hold GVL accountable for violating the land and environmental rights of rural Liberians. The group however notes that GVL's voluntary withdrawal from the certification scheme, without any indication of serious consequences, is further evidence of a critical weakness within the scheme. It further underscores the need for stronger national policies, laws and regulations to govern the activities of companies operating in the natural resource sector, especially large-scale investments in oil palm, and international agreements that are legally binding.

The Government of Liberia should also consider GVL's decision to voluntarily withdraw from the oil palm certification scheme as a wake-up call to enact the Land Rights Bill that has been under consideration since 2014. When passed into law, the Land Rights Act will recognize, formalize and strengthen communities' land rights in Liberia. This would make it easier for Liberian courts to enforce the land rights of rural communities, rather relying on voluntary certification schemes such as the RSPO.

-END-

¹ Golden Veroleum Liberia, GVL CEO announces new sustainability action plan, July 21, 2018. Available from: <http://goldenveroleumliberia.com/index.php/in-the-media/news-releases/408-gvl-ceo-announces-new-sustainability-action-plan>

Editor's Notes:

The CSO-OPWG is a coalition of civil society organizations engaged in the Oil Palm sector in Liberia providing crucial services to communities affected by oil palm concessions.

== ==

Liberia is one of the poorest countries in the world, having emerged in 2003 from 14 years of civil war. Despite ample natural resources Liberia is also food insecure, importing up to 60% of its food. The development aspirations of Liberia's government are clear and urgent following the civil war and particularly so in light of the Ebola crisis.

However, large-scale palm oil investments such as that of Golden Veroleum Liberia (GVL) and Golden Agri Resources (GAR) are still following a business model that in Indonesia's experience has shown to contribute very little to GDP, has failed to increase the number of rural jobs, increases reliance on food imports, and relies on cheap land and cheap labour.

Land clearance of GVL's 2,200 km² concession in Liberia's south east commenced in December 2010 before being halted by a December 2012 freeze on plantation expansion requested by the RSPO in response to community complaints. Plantation expansion then recommenced during 2013 and 2014 during which time further community complaints were registered with the RSPO Complaints Panel. Presently, several thousand hectares of land have been cleared and planted, including lands that are the subject of long-standing dispute between neighboring communities and in previously heavily forested areas. Liberia's forests are globally significant, with populations of chimpanzee, leopard, pygmy hippopotamus and forest elephant surveyed in the vicinity of GVL's planned concession.

Communities in Sinoe and Grand Kru counties where GVL started operations presented series of complaints to the RSPO in 2012.² The complaints centered on allegations of human rights abuses³, land grabbing, failure to secure Free Prior Informed Consent from would-be affected communities⁴, and desecration of sacred and burial sites⁵.

On February 13, 2018 the RSPO Complaint Panel found GVL to be non-compliant with several elements of the RSPO Principles and Criteria including the company's failure to implement adequate FPIC processes and procedures, destruction of sacred sites, coercion and intimidation of community members, and continued development of disputed land. GVL appealed this decision. However, on July 13, 2018, the RSPO Appeals Panel rejected GVL's appeal stating that it had "no merit"⁶.

² RSPO Case Tracker, Golden Veroleum Liberia. Available at: <https://rspo.org/members/complaints/status-of-complaints/view/24>

³ Global Witness, The New Snake Oil? The violence, threats, and false promises driving rapid palm oil expansion in Liberia, July 23, 2015. Available from: <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-deals/new-snake-oil/>

³ Forest Peoples Programme, Hollow promises: An FPIC assessment of Golden Veroleum and Golden Agri-Resource's palm oil project in south-eastern Liberia, April 2015. Available from: <http://www.forestpeoples.org/sites/fpp/files/publication/2015/04/hollow-promises-report.pdf>

⁵ Press Release, Palm Oil Giant Golden Veroleum Bulldozes Religious Sites in Liberia, Protected by Armed Police, October 2016. Available from: <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/press-releases/palm-oil-giant-golden-veroleum-liberia/>

⁶ RSPO Appeals Panel Letter Dated July 13 to GVL Ref: GVL Inc.'s appeal against the RSPO Complaint Panel's decision dated 13th February 2018