A scandal has emerged in Ocean Division, Southwest Region of Cameroon, with a little known enterprise, Camvert Sarl, that issued an authorization only FCFA 5 million, lobbying to grab as much as 60,000 hectares of forested land, owned by the State of Cameroon, to farm popy (the tree that produces FCFA 150 billion to establish a palm oil production and processing agro-industry complex. Camvert Sarl says that it will directly use 55,000 hectares, and allocate 5,000 hectares to small holders.

The 60,000 hectares of forested land that Camvert is lobbying to grab, is a concession in the Campo and Nyété Subdivisions in the Ocean Division, with a bulk of it located along the Kribi-Campo road, and border to the west by the Campo Ma'an National Park, with which it shares a boundary of approximately 50km.

The scandal emerged following Public Notice No. 000 of the weekender dated 30/05/2019, to degazette part of PMU 09-253 purportedly for agricultural production, that was signed by the Minister of Forestry and Wildlife, Jules Doret Nlongo, and published on May 15, 2019. Considering the gravity of the highly controversial public notice, as many as 40 civil society organisations from different parts of the country, on August 14 in Yaoundé signed a declaration, and addressed it to the Government, expressing deep concern for the serious consequences of the ministerial decision.

Field Trip

A group of journalists from a number of major media organs in the country, gathered in Kribi, embarked on the field trip to Nyété and Campo Subdivisions, to get the reactions of the population of the two Subdivisions, to the demand by Camvert Sarl.

On September 12, the group of journalists travelled to Nyété Subdivision where a meeting was scheduled between Camvert and the Nyété Commune President, at the DO’s Office. The meeting, which was very stormy, was chaired by the DO of Nyété, Mbojboung Hotison Bahlia, Speaking at the beginning of the meeting, the representative of Camvert, Abdou Fata, painted a rosy picture of the project, concerning the local population of Nyété and Campo Subdivisions will benefit. He assured that Camvert Sarl, owned by a 42-year-old Cameroonian whose name he would not mention, and alleged that the enterprise will invest FCFA 150 billion in the project. In a presentation that followed, a Consultant of the Camvert project, Georges Cheko, who was hired to study the environmental impact of the project, stated, among other things, that the felling of trees to replace the 60,000 hectares of forested land with oil palm plantations, will lead to the accumulation of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and, thus, pollution of the atmosphere. He also talked of the risk of erosion that the area could suffer following the cutting of trees.

Violation of International Conventions

The Chief of Adjap, Charles Edande, a retired International Consultant, attracted much attention at the meeting. The Chief made reference to the several international conventions on the protection of the environment to which Cameroon is a signatory, like the Paris Accord on Climate Change. He assessed that the Camvert project which will destroy as much as 60,000 hectares of forest, will be a violation of the international conventions.

Also quoting the Consultant of the project, who admitted that there are negative environmental impacts that can last as long as 200 years, Chief Edande asked whether what the communities in Ocean Division will gain with the Camvert project, will be more than the negative effects that will suffer. He blasted companies in the Ocean Division in particular, and Cameroon in general, as plunderers and liars. He frowned that the thousands of Camerooners who are employed by HEVECAM and SOCAPALM are treated like slaves. Chief Edande has warned agro-industries in Ocean Division do not create wealth for the people.

Speaking about the development, but the development that HEVECAM and SOCAPALM promised the people is instead misery. "So Much Has Already Been Given Over"

The Mayor of Nyété, Jean Jaures Mengue, said he had just returned from Kribi where he and the Mayor of Campo attended a meeting related to the Camvert project. He said both of them share serious concerns about the project. The Nyété Mayor said they do not even know the real shareholders of Camvert, as well as their real intention in lobbying to grab land.

The Mayor also stated that Camvert itself has admitted that they want the 60,000 hectares in the oil palm plantation sector. He asked how the enterprise will use the land in the sector, be demanding for as much as 60,000 hectares of land.

Talking about the claim by Camvert that the enterprise will invest FCFA 150 billion in the oil palm oil project, Mayor Mengue questioned the sincerity and validity of the enterprise. He pulled out a correspondence that was addressed to him on the letterhead paper of Camvert Sarl, on which it is indicated that the capital of the enterprise is FCFA 5 million. The Mayor asked why the enterprise is requesting in the capital of barely FCFA 5 million, can be claiming that it will invest FCFA 150 billion.

Mayor Mengue complained bitterly, that so much land has already been allocated in the Ocean Division to agro-industries will certainly hurt the population so badly. He said the population also needs land to put up community or private development.

The Mayor of Nyété advised the hidden faces behind Camvert project to come out and talk frankly with the people. He warned Camvert, that it is not a project that is coming to make land for the population of Nyété and Campo Subdivisions say no to this project.

Youths In Campo Say They Need Land

On September 13, the group of journalists travelled to Campo Subdivision. The first stopover was at Ebodo Village. Nestor Kowe, who spoke on behalf of the young people of the village, said that over the years, the main occupation of the villagers has been fishing. But he said with the construction of the Kribi Deep Seaport, which has brought along several maritime activities around the area where they fish, fishes have moved away, thus the villagers have been witnessing a steady drop in the quantity of fishes they catch. He said many of the villagers are now thinking of abandoning fishing, to turn to agriculture, and so they need farmlands. He said the youths also need land where they will have to build their own homes, as well as set up other businesses. Rowe was firm that the youths, in particular, are strongly against the Camvert project which will take away most of all their land.

The Chief of Essempang Village, Ngaka No’s, disclosed to the team of journalists that, during a meeting he and the Mayor of Campo, the representative of Camvert, they raised a number of worries, one of which concerns the pollution of the village. The Chief said his village, like the other villages around, does not have pipe-borne water, and that the population depends on streams for drinking water. He said they have the fear that if Camvert sets up the plantations, when the plantations are sprayed with insecticides, the streams will be polluted.

Buea Based NGO Comes With Experience

The Executive Director said their other concern is about the local communities. He explained that they are concerned that in as much as 60,000 hectares of land is taken in the area, there will not be sufficient land left in the zone to take care of urbanisation (population growth) as well as for food crop production, and so on. He also said that, with the experience EGI has in the Southwest Region, the NGO is wondering whether the Camvert project is real, or whether it is a scheme to harvest the timber within the 60,000 hectares of land.

During the meeting in Nyété on September 11, questions were repeatedly raised as to what the experience EGI has in the Souther Division, Tarkang, first of all stated that their NGO has quite a bit of experience working around oil palm agro-industrial complexes in the Southwest Region, like; PAMOL, CDC and SOCAPALM in the Dibombari production basin in the Littoral Region.

“We think that we can bring that experience onboard to bar- gain a better deal for the communities in the zone where the enterprise is requesting for the industrial complex, which is 60,000 hectares.”

And from what we have learnt in the course of this field trip, Camvert itself has no prior experience in this kind of activity. So, that raises a lot of questions.

Tarkang said the second reason why EGI is concerned with the Camvert project is that the land Camvert wants to grab is in a really ecologically sensitive zone with the Campo Ma’an National Park, which is the only one in the country, gathered in Kribi on July 11, 2019, for field trip.

Speaking at the beginning of the meeting, which was very close to the park and the proposed project area.

Suspected Mafia

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