



ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS ACTION/FRIENDS OF THE EARTH NIGERIA (ERA/FOEN)

FIELD REPORT 380

Title: Okomu Oil Palm PLC, Clears Forest, Farmlands for Industrial Agro Business in Edo State.

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1.0 HIGHLIGHTS/GENERAL IMPRESSIONS

1. **Okomu Oil Palm Company PLC** ignores revocation order by the Edo State Government, as it bulldozes Owan Forest Reserve and neighbouring Community farmlands for large scale Oil Palm Plantation business.
2. Over 60,000 people across 30 communities in 3 Local Government Areas of Edo State risk grave impacts due to Deforestation and Land grabbing for Industrial Oil Palm Plantations by Okomu Oil Palm Company PLC.
3. **Okomu Oil Palm Company PLC** is Belgian and a member of the global **SOCFIN Group**.
4. Irhue Clan and bordering communities are in danger of losing their age-old heritage.
5. Divide and Rule tactics instigated by Company breeds conflict, rift and insecurity in communities.
6. Apprehension brews for fear of project's threat to existing local food systems.
7. There is no documented evidence of an inclusive Environmental Impact Assessment in sight.
8. Communities lack basic infrastructural presence like Electricity, portable pipe borne water, health care delivery system etc...

9. Conversion of Forest to plantation poses differentiated impacts on women and vulnerable groups.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

The field monitoring exercise was aimed at getting first hand information from communities that are directly impacted by the activities of **Okomu Oil Palm Company PLC** which cuts across three Local Government regions of Edo State. They include Ovia South West with their operational head office at Udo (*See earlier field report on their activities in Ovia South West*); Ovia North East Local Government area and Uhunmwode Local Government area. The three region where the company is operational is home to Okomu Forest Reserve, Okomu National Park, Ehor Forest Reserve and Owan Forest Reserve with rich biological diversity of plant and animal species.

ERA field investigations revealed that the Oil palm plantation tycoon has ignored the revocation order by the Edo State Government of a 13,750 hectares land area in Owan and Okomu Forest Reserves (as published in an official gazette in November, 2015) to further its largescale Oil Palm and rubber plantation business bereft with human right abuses.

Three protected forest reserves (**Okomu Forest Reserve, Owan Forest Reserve and Ehor Forest Reserve**) with communal farmlands have continued to shrink in size as a result of the company's desperate crave for more lands in Nigeria.

As at the time of this report, Okomu Oil Palm Company PLC's excavators and bulldozers have continued to advance towards Owan Forest Reserve, farmlands and community settlements in Uhunmwode localities despite the restraining order.

This action, which contravenes the Forestry Laws of Nigeria, has led to human, socio, economic and environmental impacts in communities that play host to them. Over 60,000 forest dependent people (with 10,000 already impacted) are at the verge of losing their sustainable livelihood rights as well as spiritual essence due to the activities of this Belgian Oil Palm mogul.

3.0 OKOMU OIL PALM COMPANY PLC

Okomu Oil Palm Company PLC- a Belgian Oil Palm Company with operational head office in Nigeria at Udo, Edo State, Niger Delta is a member of the Global SOCFIN Group based in Europe, with Socfinco F.R.S.A based in Switzerland as its Managing agent.

Their activities in the past has led to biodiversity loss and eviction of communities (**Oweike, Ijaw camp, Agbede, Lemo, Odighi, Odiguetue, and Uhiere**) in Ovia South West & Ovia North East Local Government areas of the State. This in turn, has continued to push plant and animal

species closer to extinction as their deforestation bulldozers advances into communities neighbouring the **Owan Forest Reserve** in Uhumwode localities.

4.0 COMMUNITIES VISITED

A recent field visit to Uhumwode Local Government area revealed that communities neighbouring the Owan Forest Reserve are at the verge of losing their forest, its resources as well as farmlands that support every life form in the 95% agrarian settlements.

Communities visited include: **Oke-Irhue, Ekpan, Umokpe, Orhua communities** in Uhumwode Local Government area, and **Ozalla community** in Owan East Local Government area.

With a population of over 60,000 people, Oke-Irhue, Ekpan, Umokpe, Orhua communities make up the **Irhue clan** as community people share the same ancestry and speak the Bini and Ishan languages in their over 400 years of peaceful co-existence.

The people with rich culture and tradition are connected to nature. They have been depending mainly on forest, its resources and arable communal lands for sustainable living. The Irhue clan are known for cultivating economically viable crops like plantain, cocoa, bush mangoes (*ogbolor*), yam including vegetables, medicinal leaves & spices, figs and shrubs, which supports their local pharmaceutical needs, as well as local food sovereignty and those of other villages, towns and cities across Nigeria.

5.0 OKE COMMUNITY

Oke also known as **Oke-Irhue**, is one of the foremost communities in Irhue clan. Apart from been rich in forest and biodiversity, it has a robust traditional history of been the home of **Queen Idia**-the renowned mother of **Late Oba Esigie of great Benin Kingdom**. It is also home to one of the cleanest and purest water bodies in the Niger Delta, called **Ezenughegbe** (*a river with the face of a mirror*). This area serves as a reservoir water catchment area with several streams that serve as tributaries to other rivers in the region.

All these resources are at the verge of been completely lost with plants and animal species pushed one step closer to extinction if urgent action is not taken to stop the invasion.

Their rich soil has given birth to great farmer folks (including women). Their women are industrious and depend on forest resources like bush mangoes (*ogbolor*), spices, fruits and vegetables to support the local food market which in turn help to sustain their livelihoods.

They depend on medicinal leaves, herbs and figs from the forest to take care of the local pharmaceutical needs of their family and those that fall under their care. It was also observed

that women and girls now travel long distances to farm as well as fetch fuel wood for their domestic energy needs.

6.0 EKPAN COMMUNITY

This community has a population of about 6,000 people. They speak Binin and Ishan languages. Even if the forest and farmlands in this community has not yet been bulldozed by Okomu Oil Palm Company, the community people are worried about the news and experiences of neighbouring communities and are ready to resist any invasion into their land.

Ekpan, one of the communities in Irhue clan is resource rich but Infrastructurally poor. It does not have any pipe borne water. Their only source of portable water is from private water vendors/tankers.

Ofumwengbe river- the only stream in the locality is over 2km across hilly terrains from the community settlements. It takes about two hours to go and return by foot.

7.0 UMOKPE COMMUNITY

Located in the middle of Irhue-clan in Uhumwode Local Government area, the Umokpe people are blessed with rich forest, biodiversity and aerable land. Majority of the people here are farmers with about 5% of the population into craft making.

Umokpe community is a hub of freshly harvested food crops like plantain, Cassava, melon, yam and fruits. As a traditional land with rich culture, Umokpe land is home to **Eziz anumokpe**- one of the strongest deities of the Great Benin Kingdom.

This **high class deity** with shrines that dot the community has popularised the area over the years. These shrines are domiciled in the forest within the Owan Forest Reserve where Okomu Oil Palm PLC is currently bulldozing. Two main rivers are in this community- **River Evbohi and River Ehorkhun**.

According to Chief Esogban of Umokpe, these rivers forbid oil, and the community people serve these rivers which has great healing and fertility enhancement potentials for its users who usually besiege Umokpe community from far and near especially during their yearly festival held every 22nd of November.

"We clean up the stream yearly through our age group system in place, the water is very clean and clear and has great healing property that also wades off evil when used.....This is a sacred land. If Okomu comes here, a lot of things will go wrong and people would die"-The Esogban of Umokpe.

"There are medicinal leaves and herbs in this our forest that is useful to pregnant women as well as those that can enhance the fertility of women and men. We have cases where women who have been wanting to be pregnant, but they become pregnant after 3 months of using the herbs with water from our Evbohi River. If there is any evil done on this land, the rivers could dry up, and we do not want that. Hence, we forbid Okomu from this land." **Chief Osadebamen Ogiewe, Secretary to Umokpe Palace.**

8.0 ORHUA COMMUNITY

Orhua is the ancestral head of Irhue Clan (by default). It came into existence over 400 years ago. Benin and Ishan languages are commonly spoken in this community which has produced important personalities and dignitaries from all walks of life. Yet the realities on ground does not reflect the influence such individuals can bring to these more educational inclined community.

None of the communities visited is connected to the national electricity grid. The only visible Government infrastructure in the communities visited was a block of class room each at Oke and Orhua communities.

Despite Okomu Oil Palm Company's presence in the area, none of these communities have benefitted from the its Corporate Social responsibility. The only one promised was a borehole at Oke which has been abandoned as at the time ERA field monitors visited. The second was an ongoing renovation of a block of classrooms at Oke.

9.0 TESTIMONIES

- I. *"We used to be the major producers of Yam in Irhue clan but today we are not because majority of our farmlands have been bulldozed by Okomu Oil Palm PLC. Now we go to far away communities to farm. We do not need them here-***Mrs. Florence Sadoh, Oke Community.**
- II. *They destroyed 8 acres of my farmland without compensation, after investing over 300,000 Naira. We did not have any agreement with them, they forced themselves on our community. We do not have any other work here apart from farming, which we depend on...They have soldiers guarding them all around. They intimidate us with that and they dont allow us to enter the place....they have a police station in their operational area.* **Imafidon Isaac, Umokpe Community.**
- III. *I can no longer meet up with my financial responsibilities as a father and husband. I had 5 acres of cultivated plantain and yam farm that was cleared away by Okomu Oil Palm bulldozers. I was not paid any compensation, I was not given another land to farm on. My*

children has dropped out of the University because I can no longer pay their school fees.
Mr. Godwin Ukhuegbe, Oke-Irhue Community.

- IV. *We support Government revocation. Let Okomu Oil Palm Company leave our land for us. We did not write any agreement with them, they should come and park their dead borehole sinking making away from our communit. We cannot compare the value of their proposed borehole and the renovation of our secondary school to the resources they have deprived us of.* **C. S Irabor, Oke Community.**
- V. *Anytime my child comes home from school, I run to the farm, harvest plantain for sale and then the money is given to him to go back to school. Its the farm that that has given me strength and courage to train my daughter in school, now without any consideration they want to kill the dream of my daughter becoming a doctor. I feel really bad....if you people dont aske Okomu, my God will ask and Judge them.* **Mrs. Margaret Wilson, Oke Community.**
- VI. *"We have over 27 privately constructed boreholes in our community. If they want to help us, let them leave our land for us and pay us for what they destroyed. We don't need their borehole".***Mrs. Florence Sadoh, Oke Community.**
- VII. *Where do they want us to farm, if they destroy our forest and expand their oil palm plantation into our land?* **Hon. Onaiwu, Ekpan Community.**
- VIII. *They talk to us like they are doing us a favour, like we don't have any right. They were in our community mid last year(2016)They told us that we cannot stop them from occupying the land and that they have already been given the land by the Government, and if we do not agree to that, we are the loser.* **Mrs. Esther Onaiwu, Ekpan Community.**
- IX. *They promised us alot of things that they are going to do in our community, they promised us that before December 2016, they will come to sink a borehole in our community. Till date we have not seen them let alone their borehole.They are trying to divide us here. But we will not allow them by God's grace"* **Mr. Sunday Isaiah.**
- X. *I am a bike rider. I help to transport harvested crops and produce to different places around the local government area. Its from the money I make I use in taking care of my family, but for some time now my work has slowed down because most of the land for the farmers who are my customers in other communities have been taken over by one*

*palm oil company. If we allow them come here, it will affect our people and my business too.... I will not be able to make money from transporting farm produce. **Mr. Samuel Sylvester, Ekpan Community.***

- XI.** *We have sworn against anyone who will take money(bribe) from Okomu Oil Palm Company to divide us, impoverish us, or betray us. **Pa. Samuel Aiwekhoe Ozigbo, Odionwere of Orhua and Clan Head of Irhue Clan.***
- XII.** *I was born in 1949. I grew up to meet the forest here. Okomu Oil Palm Company is trying to penetrate our forest through Oke Community. We depend on this forest for so many things. It's a place of hope that we always look forward to bequeathing to our children. We want the world to come to our aid. We are not asking for too much...we just need our land back. **Mr. Sunday Erhaghewu, Orhua Community.***
- XIII.** *The forest is my office, my farm and my market.It is from it that I sustain my life and also train my children who are schooling in the city. **Mrs. Grace Osunbor, Umokpe Community.***
- XIV.** *How much good is Okomu going to do that can equate with the benefits of our forest and farmlands to me and my family?I know how I gain from forest and farm produce..If we allow the company to take this our land, our children may now become thieves and prostitutes. **Mrs. Florence Imafidon, Umukpe Community.***
- XV.** *I do not have a husband. It is from the forest that I get money to train my children. I collect medicinal leaves that cures insanity and infertility for those in need....it is from the river that we get our source of drinking water from. **Eunice Isighi, Umukpe Community.***
- XVI.** *I was arrested in May 2016 by one J.B, a contractor with Okomu Oil Palm Company over allegation that I was one of those that destroyed the company's bulldozers, just because we said we cannot give our land out to them, they framed me up. I was locked up in cell for 3 days. I was not surprise about the allegation because the Company is desperate. We have taken the case to court. **Orhua Community leader.***

10.0 RECOMMENDATIONS/WAYFORWARD

- a) Write to the Edo State Government to enforce the Revocation order against Okomu Oil Palm Company PLC in Owan and Okomu Forest Reserves in Edo State.
- b) Intensify the campaign to Stop existing and future large scale plantation expansion in Edo State and Nigeria.
- c) Improve/build Community people's rights to be able to make informed choice.
- d) Intensify campaigns against land grabbing and deforestation by Okomu Oil Palm PLC for Industrial Oil Palm plantation business at the National & International levels.
- e) Call for a transparent, and participatory EIA process on present and future projects.
- f) Alternative livelihood programs should be adopted especially for women ahead of the looming danger that may come.

11.0 CONCLUSION

Plantation is not Forest. Allowing the conversion of diverse forest ecosystem which supports all life forms and reduce the impact of climate change to a mere crop duplicated over a large expanse of land, is a crime against nature and mother earth, that should not be promoted. Industrial plantations has track records of undermining community rights anywhere and everywhere in World.

12.0 PICTURES



Restriction sign on the land



The degraded land