



Liberia: Rescuing the Environment from Industrialization

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Liberia has been at relative peace since the end of the civil war in 2003 and since then, there has been a strong emphasis on industrialization and foreign investment that has come at the cost of the environment. Specifically, HRDs in Liberia face a combination of threats as they work to protect the environment and raise awareness of human rights abuses that go on in Liberia. They must contend with threats from the government, foreign investors, and private companies to ensure that the environment is protected.

HRDs must work with the government and, as a result, they have to deal with corruption within the Liberian Government and, despite free speech rights, the government seeks to silence dissenters in several ways.¹ There is a Freedom of Information Act, but it is rarely used because journalists who go looking for information from the government are threatened, harassed, or detained to keep unfavorable information from getting out to the public.² These threats can happen at any point and to anyone, but environmental activists are at particular risk because of the nature of their protests. Liberia is rapidly attempted to industrialize and any protests that place foreign investment in danger are dealt with harshly. These protesters are labeled as terrorists, anti-Liberia, and anti-investment by the government while facing detainment and harassment. For example, in 2015, activists were peacefully protesting a plantation when police

¹ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/liberia/freedom-world/2020>

² <https://freedomhouse.org/country/liberia/freedom-world/2020>



responded with tear gas and physical violence.³ At least thirty protesters were arrested, and fifteen protesters were held for over a year without a hearing.⁴ One protester died after forty-nine days and the cause of death was listed as “unknown”.⁵

Despite the threats, shutting down these palm oil plantations are worth the risk to many activists because of the damage they do to the environment. Activists have faced human rights violations at the hands of these plantations, as well as the environment and the citizens of Liberia have suffered because of the production of palm oil and rubber.⁶ These companies seize land without compensation and proceed to cause mass amounts of pollution. The plantations damage the land and render it unusable to the public. Protesters often lose their jobs, are harassed, threatened, or outright arrested. Then, at the protests themselves, the Internet is restricted, and the police use violence to end the peaceful protest.⁷

As it stands, and despite the struggles, the HRDs in Liberia are well prepared for the dangers that they face. Leaders of various activism groups have safety assessments and contingency plans should any violence erupt from the police or other bystanders. Protection and safety are emphasized by HRDs in Liberia because, while there are periods of peace, the threat of

³ https://www.lifemosaic.net/images/uploads/New_Snake_Oil_-_July_2015_-_Final_lores.pdf p.16

⁴ <https://mongabay-images.s3.amazonaws.com/19/RSPO-Field%20verification%20report,%20revised.pdf> p.13

⁵ <https://www.business-humanrights.org/pt/últimas-not%C3%ADcias/liberia-riot-on-the-plantation-in-depth-account-of-may-2015-protests-at-golden-veroleum-site-causes-aftermath/>

⁶ <http://www.cao-ombudsman.org/cases/document-links/documents/CAOComplaint-Liberia-SRC01.pdf>

⁷ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/liberia/freedom-world/2020>



violence (especially around election periods) remains a constant thought in everyone's mind.

Liberian HRDs have found that going into hiding, whether within Liberia or across the border, is an effective measure to keeping safe during times of unrest and the Report believes that this method would work in other countries as well.

Despite these struggles, the Liberian Government has still made strides in ensuring freedom to protest. The Independent National Commission on Human Rights in Liberia (INCHR) is well-supported and is fully compliant with the Paris Principles.⁸ Liberia recently ratified several international agreements, including the ICCPR, ICESCR, CEDAW, CAT, and the protocol to the African Union which subjects them to the African Court.⁹ The Report has several suggestions to add to these agreements. One of these suggestions is better protections for Liberian HRDs against private and corporate actors. This is important because that is the largest threat to HRDs in Liberia as the country seeks foreign investment at the cost of the environment. The Report suggests that the Liberian government needs to respect the rights of HRDs to protest and protect the environment, as well as the government needs to pass laws that specifically protect the HRDs. While this would be a useful tool, there are concerns about whether the laws would be followed. As it stands, there are several laws designed to protect free speech and access to information, but protesters and activists are still threatened and detained. The Report would have police held accountable for arbitrarily arrested protestors and while this would be a major

⁸[https://nhri.ohchr.org/EN/AboutUs/GANHRIAcreditiation/Documents/Status%20Accreditation%20-%20Chart%20\(%2027%20November%202019\).pdf](https://nhri.ohchr.org/EN/AboutUs/GANHRIAcreditiation/Documents/Status%20Accreditation%20-%20Chart%20(%2027%20November%202019).pdf) p.5

⁹ <http://www.claiminghumanrights.org/liberia.html?&L=0>



improvement to human rights in Liberia, there must first be a desire to implement these changes by those in charge of the Liberian government.