



Anti-Corruption APPG

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Anti-Corruption
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Panel discussion: Oil exploration in Virunga National Park, DRC

Tuesday 16 December | 2.30pm – 3.30pm | Committee Room 17

Chair: Anas Sarwar MP (Co-Chair, APPG Anti-Corruption)

Panel: Alphonse Muhindo Valivambe (Reseau Cref), Daniel Balint-Kurti (Global Witness), Tina Lain (IUCN).

Attendees: Tessa Munt MP, Jeremy Lefroy MP, Pauline Latham OBE MP, Baroness Stern, Mark Durkan MP, Fraser Murray (Christian Aid), Nat Dyer (Global Witness), Katy Schofield (Synchronicity Earth), Ruth Stanley (Trade Out of Poverty), Emma Norton (Violet Films), Alice McCool (Transparency International UK), Saira O'Mallie (ONE), Katy Lawson (APPG Nigeria and Uganda), Catherine Bryan, Naomi Hirst (APPG Anti-Corruption).

This discussion focussed on oil exploration that has taken place in the Democratic Republic of Congo's Virunga National Park, a world heritage site that is home to about a quarter of the world's mountain gorillas and important regional fisheries. Soco International, a FTSE250 company, was granted rights to explore for oil in Virunga in 2007. The oil project has since been the focus of allegations of human rights abuses and corruption, as well as mounting concerns over its environmental implications.

Please refer to '[Drillers in the Mist](#)' and coverage of the issue by [Human Rights Watch](#) for full details of the allegations.

Presentations

Daniel Balint-Kurti, researcher and campaigner for Global Witness, outlined how Soco International's activities in Virunga present a test case for the UK's commitment to confronting and prosecuting corruption committed by British firms or their contractors overseas. In reference to the allegations of corruption and violence linked to the oil project, which are outlined in Global Witness's report 'Drillers in the Mist', Balint-Kurti called for the UK and US authorities to investigate and for investors in Soco International, including the Church of England, to demand an independent investigation or divest from the company.

Alphonse Muhindo Valimvabene, an activist from Eastern Goma, detailed how Virunga's status as a national park should afford it protection from oil exploration as a matter of national law. In addition, the park is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site and ought to be protected by this internationally conferred status. There is also an historical reason why the park should be protected; before independence local landowners gave land to the Belgian government and in return the government gave the communities Lake Edward which provides livelihoods for approximately 75 000 people. Muhindo explained how the oil exploration already conducted by Soco International is illegal under national and international law and threatens local communities.

Activists who are campaigning against Soco International's activities in the park have experienced threats of violence which are often linked to armed rebel groups who operate in the region. Muhindo spoke of his personal experience of receiving threats as a result of his

campaigning against oil exploration in Virunga: in 2012, when M23 arrived in Goma, Muhindo was forced to flee DRC and spent three months in London as a refugee.

In concluding, Muhindo expressed concern and disappointment that a British company would seemingly associate itself with rebel groups who perpetuate violence in a fragile region.

Tina Lain, a representative of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, has worked in the region with grassroots activists and local communities for a number of years. Lain described how the communities of Virunga are often excluded from making decisions about the future of the park. National and international rules have already been broken in Virunga and civil society has been restricted from speaking out. Individuals have received death threats and fishermen have been intimidated for raising community concerns. Many local people have expressed surprise that a British company behaves in such an irresponsible way in a region that is only just emerging from 20 years of conflict. Lain concluded by alluding to the many tensions that run between the park, the communities, and Soco International and warned that if the park loses its community leaders, the park will lose its fight to protect the land from exploration.

Soco International, who were not present at the meeting, deny the allegations and say that it “does not condone, partake in or tolerate corrupt or illegal activity whatsoever”. For more details see [Soco's full response](#) to Global Witness's report.

Discussion

Baroness Stern enquired how well known the allegations against Soco International are. The panellists responded that the [Telegraph published a full length feature](#) on the situation in Virunga and that the documentary, ‘[Virunga](#)’, is available to view on Netflix and has been shortlisted for an Oscar nomination.

Attendees also asked about Soco International's structure. The panel described how the company was initially founded by American nationals and later listed on the London Stock Exchange. Three top executives are employed by a company registered in Delaware - Global Witness are therefore calling for the US to investigate the company's activities as well as the UK.

Soco International has its own audit committee and given the allegations and evidence should commission an independent investigation and publish the results. However, a potential inquiry should not preclude a criminal investigation by the Serious Fraud Office or US Department of Justice. Global Witness has had [communication from Soco International](#) who have affirmed that ‘where there is evidence, they will investigate’ and demanded that the evidence be shared. However, the panel suggested that to date Soco International has failed to seriously address the evidence that has already been published or broadcast via the Global Witness and Human Rights Watch reports or the documentary film.

Pauline Latham OBE MP confirmed that she has distributed copies of the ‘Drillers in the Mist’ report to the Secretary of State for International Development, her Permanent Private Secretary, and the Minister of State for International Development. She also intends to write to the Bishop of Derby, and will raise the case of Virunga at DFID questions on 17 December. The APPG that she chairs, the APPG on International Mining, will endeavour to invite Soco International to respond to the allegations.

Tessa Munt MP stated that she has written to the majority of Bishops in the Church of England raising concerns about the Church's investment in Soco International including

copies of the 'Drillers in the Mist' report, the Human Rights Watch report, and Soco International's responses to allegations with her letter. She will write to the remaining Church Commissioners and is confident that the Church are now aware of the calls for them to investigate their investment or divest.

The panellists welcomed this action and confirmed that to their knowledge the Church of England holds at least £300,000 of shares in the company, which admittedly is not a huge percentage stake, but is four times that amount that the Church held in Wonga before divesting from the money-lending company in 2013. Moreover, the Church of England has the potential to be a moral leader amongst investors and lead the call for Soco International to instigate an investigation into the allegations under threat of divestment.

Anas Sarwar MP inquired about the risk to communities and activists in Virunga. Muhindo responded that for activists every day brings the threat of death. He personally has been working as a campaigner since 2003 but did not receive threats until he began campaigning against oil exploration in Virunga in 2010. He himself has received anonymous threatening text messages whilst Emmanuel de Merode, Director of Virunga, was ambushed and shot on a return journey to Virunga directly after he had submitted a portfolio of evidence against the company to local prosecuting authorities in early 2014. Soco has condemned the attack on de Merode and said that it had "[no link whatsoever to the attack](#)".

Jeremy Lefroy MP asked if the successful exploration of Lake Albert was incentivising exploration in Lake Edward. The panellists agreed that this could be the case but pointed to the difference status that Lakes Edward and Albert hold in law; Lake Edward has protection conferred by its national and World Heritage Site status. Moreover, there are many other sites in Congo which are eligible for prospecting. Lain pointed out that Virunga has great potential to be a centre of sustainable development in Congo and that there is a long-term economic incentive to preserve the biodiversity of the park. The panellists and attendees recognised that ultimately it is down to the government in Congo to make the decision to protect the park and its citizens.

In concluding the discussion the attendees agreed that the people of Virunga need a commitment from Soco International that they will not explore within the current boundaries of the park and launch an internal investigation into the allegations. The attendees agreed to explore other opportunities to pursue this outcome in the Houses of Parliament.

ENDS.