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Virunga: UK company bankrolled soldiers accused of bribery and violence in quest for oil in Africa's oldest national park

AGM scandal for British company at centre of Leonardo DiCaprio-backed Oscar-nominated film

- Cheques and receipts revealed by Global Witness show oil company Soco International paid over \$40,000 in just two weeks to Congolese military officer accused of bribery and violence
- Officer and his soldiers implicated in bribing, intimidating and even killing Soco opponents
- Company dogged by critics of oil work in UNESCO-protected park, home to rare gorillas

New leaked documents released today by Global Witness show that British oil company Soco International paid tens of thousands of dollars to a Congolese military officer accused of brutally silencing opponents of its oil exploration in Democratic Republic of Congo's Virunga National Park.

The revelation comes in the wake of Soco's repeated denials and on the day of the company's annual general meeting, putting pressure on Soco to commit to refrain from exploring or drilling for oil inside the current boundaries of Virunga. Campaigners are also calling for UK and US authorities to launch an urgent investigation into Soco's actions in eastern Congo.

Soco has faced several allegations that it made illicit payments to Congolese officials, in particular to its military liaison officer Major Burimba Feruzi, as it sought access to the park for oil. Feruzi was caught on camera in the filming of the Oscar-nominated documentary '[Virunga](#)', offering a \$3,000 bribe to a senior park ranger and is accused of ordering the beating and detention of Soco's opponents, abuses documented in the Global Witness report '[Drillers in the Mist](#)'. More serious still, locals claim that two fishermen resistant to Soco's presence were killed by soldiers connected to company security, according to a [Human Rights Watch researcher](#). Feruzi commanded soldiers around Soco's base and was responsible for staff security. It is not alleged that the company ordered the threats and violence.

The documents released today – a series of cheques from Soco's local bank account to Feruzi and his handwritten and signed notes of receipt – show that the company made payments to the officer of \$42,250 over the course of barely two weeks in spring 2014. That's the equivalent of over 30 years' salary for a Congolese army Major. Evidence also suggests that Soco was paying the salaries of the soldiers near the company's base at the time of the alleged killings of the fishermen. The receipt for a payment in April, when the fishermen died, outlines that the money was to be used in part to pay the soldiers' salaries for that month.

The disclosure of the documents is bringing renewed calls for Soco to face criminal investigations into allegations of wrongdoing by its contractors in the oldest national park in Africa, a UNESCO World Heritage site which is home to a quarter of the world's mountain gorilla population. Soco

should be held responsible for actions carried out in the company's interest by people in its pay, campaigners say.

"These documents show that despite Soco's repeated denials the company has paid tens of thousands of dollars to an army officer accused of bribing and intimidating those trying to stop oil exploration in one of Africa's natural treasures. These payments may only be the tip of the iceberg" said Nathaniel Dyer, head of the Congo team at Global Witness.

"The UK Serious Fraud Office and the US Department of Justice must launch a full investigation into the company's practices in Virunga, especially into whether it breached bribery and corruption laws. The company should not be allowed to sell its block before an independent and credible inquiry is undertaken and published, and appropriate action is taken."

In response to questions about the cheques and receipts published today, Deputy CEO Roger Cagle said that Feruzi had been assigned to Soco following a requirement to have a military liaison in the region. Cagle said neither Feruzi "nor any other soldiers were ever employed by Soco and all orders were provided to them by the DRC [Congolese] Government." Any financial arrangements were "above board" and agreed with the Congolese government, Cagle added. Cagle said that Clifford Chance, the company's solicitors, is "investigating matters" and that any allegations of this nature are treated by Soco with the "utmost seriousness" and that the company is "committed to operating under the best business practices". In a [2014 letter to Global Witness](#), Soco denied breaching UK bribery laws and condemned the use of violence and intimidation. A Soco representative also said the company has not paid Feruzi.

Nathaniel Dyer said, "Soco's half-hearted response to these serious allegations must end here. Soco must commit to respecting Virunga's current boundaries, and it must be held accountable for any past wrongdoing."

The back story: cheques, lies and videotape

The evidence shows that in spring 2014, around the time that Soco began critically important seismic testing in Virunga, the company paid Feruzi while simultaneously making denials of its involvement with him. In the space of just five weeks between 24 April and 29 May 2014, Soco made two payments to Feruzi. In the same period Soco gave three separate on-record statements to the BBC, Global Witness and its own shareholders, in which it denied any payments to Feruzi or said that he had no role for the company.

In May, just two weeks after Feruzi received four cheques totalling \$15,600 from a Congolese bank account in Soco's name, a Soco spokesperson told Global Witness, "He [Feruzi] hasn't received money from us...We wouldn't allow that and the books haven't revealed that he has." A more detailed chronology of these events is also available [here](#).

[Media reports in March](#) this year said that soldiers guarding Soco installations were paid by the company and had beaten locals who were trying to fish on the lake. The BBC reported at the time that [Soco said](#) it had never paid Feruzi or any other soldiers, directly or indirectly, and that "the soldiers' salaries were paid by the government in the usual way."

In one of the leaked handwritten receipts Feruzi says he received the money from Damas Vunabandi, and the other refers to "Mr Damas". Damas Vunabandi was at the time Soco's protocol

officer. Damas is also the brother of Celestin Vunabandi, who was at the time a Congolese government minister who had been paid by Soco to work as a pro-oil lobbyist.

“The dates on the documents show that Soco made these payments after its officials knew that there was good evidence that Feruzi had offered bribes and intimidated and abused opponents of oil exploration,” said Nathaniel Dyer. “Worse still, the company continued to deny making payments to Feruzi or soldiers. These documents show, therefore, that the denials of any payments were untrue.”

The new evidence comes on the back of widespread criticism of Soco’s activities in the park. In March 2015, Tessa Munt, then leader of a cross-party anti-corruption group of British MPs, [called for UK and US authorities to investigate](#) claims that Soco may have breached anti-corruption legislation. In February 2015 the Church of England joined fellow investor [Aviva](#) in [speaking publicly about its concerns](#) over Soco’s behaviour.

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Notes to editors

1. The documents show that Major Burimba Feruzi, a Congolese army officer accused of bribery and intimidation, received thousands of dollars, on at least two occasions. Global Witness is publishing four cheques made out to Feruzi from a local bank account in Soco’s name. The account name ‘SOCO EXPL ET PROD BLOC V / GOMA’ at the Banque Internationale De Credit (BIC) is printed on the cheques. The four separate cheques dated 15 May 2014 are made out to Feruzi, totalling \$15,600. Global Witness has Feruzi’s handwritten and signed receipt for the same amount. A second handwritten document from Feruzi confirms receipt of \$26,650, dated 30 April 2014.
2. Local and international NGOs have accused Feruzi and the troops under him – those tasked with protecting Soco’s installations – of grave human rights abuses. Opponents of Soco’s work have been [beaten, detained](#) and even killed, [according to locals](#) and [Human Rights Watch](#). The arrests, violence and intimidation that Soco’s opponents have been subjected to is verified and documented in Global Witness’s [Drillers in the Mist](#).
3. Soco’s presence in Virunga is controversial. As a UNESCO-protected site, oil exploration is banned in Virunga under the World Heritage Convention and opponents claim that Soco’s activities are illegal under Congolese law.
4. French oil giant Total, which was also awarded an oil block that partially covers Virunga park, committed in [2013](#) to not explore inside Virunga park’s current boundaries, thereby ruling out any potential to backtrack should the Congolese government redraw the park. In [2014](#) Total extended that commitment to all UNESCO World Heritage sites.
5. Following its summit in Doha in June 2014, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee [asked](#) “for a clear and written commitment from SOCO, or any other oil company, not to explore nor exploit oil and gas in any World Heritage site, including Virunga National Park”. While Soco [has said](#) it will have no further involvement in its block, it has not provided a written commitment to respect Virunga’s current boundaries. In fact, when The Times asked Soco to clarify whether it would rule out returning to Virunga should the boundaries be redrawn, [Soco declined to comment](#).