

His Excellency Paul Biya  
President of the Republic of Cameroon

October 17, 2016

**RE: US Government Support to Herakles Farms Project in Cameroon**

Dear President Biya,

We, the undersigned US-based non-governmental organizations, are writing you with regard to the lease of 19,843 ha granted to Herakles Farms and its subsidiary, SG Sustainable Oils Cameroon Ltd (SG SOC) in November 2013. We recently learned of the significant pressure applied on your administration by the US government to approve the project and want to let you know of the steps that we are taking to hold it accountable for these actions.

As you are well aware, from its inception the Herakles Farms / SG SOC project has been full of flaws. Amongst myriad issues, the company deforested prime, high conservation value rainforest to make way for a monoculture palm oil plantation; violated your nation's laws by moving forward with the project before securing a proper Presidential Decree and against the will of local communities; ignored orders to cease work issued by your ministries; conducted illegal logging; and engaged in bribery and corruption. In addition, the effects of the project are high, including socio-economic consequences for up to 45,000 local residents; unclear economic benefits for Cameroon due to low land rental rates, tax exemptions, and the ability to carry forward losses indefinitely; and serious environmental concerns, including habitat destruction, surface and groundwater contamination, and the high use of pesticides.

Your government took prudent action when these flaws began to emerge. As we now know through cables obtained via a Freedom of Information Act request in the US, you and several other Cameroonian governmental officials expressed important concerns regarding this project to high-level US diplomats and government officials. Members of your Ministries of Agriculture and Forests also highlighted serious issues with the environmental and legal aspects of the project, taking steps to bring a halt to this disastrous project.

Through the cables, we understand that despite these concerns, representatives of the US government put significant pressure on your administration to approve the land deal. These include comments by then-Deputy Assistant Secretary for African Affairs, Cynthia Akuetteh, suggesting that "failure to act could cause uncertainty in the local business climate and have a chilling effect on future foreign investment."<sup>1</sup>

This pressure appears to be completely unjustified. There is no clear economic gain for the US in the Herakles Farms / SG SOC deal. In fact, the US support to the Herakles Farms / SG SOC project directly contradicts official US policy and goals around climate change and conservation, and undermines numerous US-funded projects in Cameroon. As such, one question we are asking the US government is whose interests it was promoting by pushing for this land deal, as the identity of the investors involved

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<sup>1</sup> Cable authored by the US Embassy in Cameroon, May 31, 2013, available at: <http://www.oaklandinstitute.org/herakles-cables>

in the project have not been made public and the company is registered in a tax haven, the Cayman Islands.

Now that information about the US government's actions is in the public domain, we are working to hold the US government accountable for its actions. We have written to the State Department, urging them to release a public statement revoking any pressure applied to your government in the past, as well as pledging not to apply any pressure in the future with regards to this deal.

President Biya, this November you will decide whether to renew or cancel this lease. In the years since the lease was granted, community opposition to this project has continued to grow, and social tension and strife have mounted in the villages affected by this lease, including in the Babessi II, Baduman, Meangwe II, Fabe, Ndiba, Loe Batanga, and Lipenja I villages. With information about the US' inappropriate interference now publically known, we are hoping that you will resist foreign pressure and side with your people by canceling Herakles Farms / SG SOC lease.

Yours sincerely,

Oakland Institute

Africa Faith and Justice Network

Environmental Defender Law Center

SAVE Wildlife Conservation Fund

Rainforest Action Network

International Accountability Project

EarthAction International

Inclusive Development International

Presbyterian Church USA

Global Justice Program at UC Berkeley's Haas Institute

Community Alliance for Global Justice

The Rules

Local Futures USA

Movement Rights

Cultural Survival

Priority Africa Network

Food Empowerment Project

Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement

The Borneo Project