

Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield
Assistant Secretary, Bureau of African Affairs
United States Department of State

CC: His Excellency Paul Biya, President of the Republic of Cameroon
Ambassador Michael S. Hoza, Ambassador of the United States of America to the Republic of Cameroon
Dr. Richard Ruggerio, Chief of International Conservation, US Forest and Wildlife Service
Jude Aidoo, USAID / CARPE

October 17, 2016

RE: US State Department Support to Herakles Farms Project in Cameroon

Dear Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield,

We, the undersigned non-governmental organizations from the US, Cameroon, and around the world, write with deep concern regarding the role of the US government in advocating for the Herakles Farms palm oil project in Cameroon.

Through cables recently obtained under a Freedom of Information Act request,¹ we have learned that US diplomats and high-level US officials applied serious pressure on the Cameroonian government to approve the Herakles Farms project. The cables show that during her visit to Cameroon in May 2013, then-Deputy Assistant Secretary for African Affairs Cynthia Akuetteh brought up Herakles Farms in at least three meetings with various high-level Cameroonian officials, including the President and Prime Minister. This is in addition to at least one previous meeting between then-US Ambassador Robert Jackson and Cameroon's Secretary General of the Presidency on the issue. Mentioned in these meetings was the suggestion that "failure to act could cause uncertainty in the local business climate and have a chilling effect on future foreign investment."²

The cables also show that US government officials were well aware of the opposition of local communities and of the many flaws with the project. Amongst myriad issues reported in the cables, the company deforested a biodiversity-rich forest region to make way for a palm oil plantation; violated Cameroonian laws in multiple instances; misled local villagers; and conducted illegal tree cutting. In addition, the effects of the project are high, including serious socio-economic consequences for 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.

Finally, the cables show that Cameroonian officials expressed serious issues with the Herakles Farms project to US government representatives. They highlighted the concerns of civil society and non-

¹ The cables can be found at: <http://www.oaklandinstitute.org/herakles-cables>

² Cable authored by the US Embassy in Cameroon, May 31, 2013, available at: <http://www.oaklandinstitute.org/herakles-cables>

governmental organizations and the need to ensure that development takes place equitably. The cables also note that the Ministries of Agriculture and Forestry opposed the project because of its location near national parks and protected areas, and because Herakles Farms was engaging in illegal logging.

Despite these serious concerns, Cameroonian President Paul Biya approved a three-year lease to approximately 20,000 ha for the Herakles Farms project in November 2013.

The pressure applied by the US has no justification. There is no clear economic benefit for the US from this project. In fact, the US lobby for this project comes in blatant contradiction of official US policy and goals around climate change and conservation, and undermines numerous US-funded projects in Cameroon. For example, a key priority of USAID in Cameroon is to protect tropical forests, in part by supporting the government of Cameroon with natural resource management. Cameroon is also part of the Central Africa Regional Program on the Environment (CARPE), a program that strives to reduce the rate of deforestation, forest degradation, and biodiversity loss in the region, and receives US\$15 million annually to achieve these goals. The US Fish and Wildlife Service has also invested millions in protecting the habitats of endangered wildlife in Cameroon, including fighting logging.

To this end we ask: what was the rationale behind the US government's advocacy for this project and whose interests were promoted by pushing for this land deal, as the identity of the investors involved in the project has not been made public and the company is registered in a tax haven, the Cayman Islands?

In light of the disastrous impacts of the Herakles Farms project, and the direct contradictions with US policy in the region, we implore you to remedy the situation created by pressuring the Cameroonian government into granting the lease. We ask that you release a public statement revoking any pressure applied in the past, as well as pledging not to apply any pressure in the future to the Cameroonian government regarding this deal.

Yours sincerely,

Oakland Institute

Africa Faith and Justice Network

Environmental Defender Law Center

Greenpeace Africa

Struggle to Economize Future Environment

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