PLANTATIONS ET HuILERIES DU CONGO (PHC) IS A PALM OIL COMPANY OWNED BY CANADIAN AGRIBUSINESS FERNIA. IT OPERATES PLANTATIONS IN SEVERAL LOCATIONS IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO, INCLUDING IN TSHPPO PROVINCE.

THE COMPANY IS SUPPOSED TO BRING DEVELOPMENT TO THE REGION, BUT COMMUNITIES AROUND PHC HAVE NOT BENEFITED. INSTEAD, THEY EXPERIENCE INCREASED POVERTY AND INJUSTICE.

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This is Mathieu, who lives in a village next to the Phc plantation.

The plantation is supposed to bring development, but we live in dire poverty!

Even those of us who work at Phc only get short-term contracts and little pay!

This in glaring contrast to the massive salaries paid to expat company managers.

Their plantation is on our lands, they took it by force!

The plantation was established in 1911, when the whites dominated the blacks. There was no dialogue.
Now, we do not have enough land to cultivate, or forests in which to hunt. That's why there is famine!

In this past week, 9 children have died from kwashiorkor.

Despite occupying most of the land, the company even tried to extend the plantation.

The pesticides they use kill many trees and plants...

...and there are toxins in the ground and water.

Snails and snakes have become extinct and our fish are deformed.

Our goats drink the water and eat the plants, so when we eat their meat, we get sick.
IN 2018, THE COMPANY SIGNED AN AGREEMENT WITH LOCAL COMMUNITIES, PROMISING TO INVEST IN SCHOOLS AND HEALTHCARE, BUT NOT MUCH HAS HAPPENED.

THIS LACK OF ACTION IS SURPRISING, GIVEN THAT DEBONIKA RECEIVED MILLIONS IN FUNDING FROM EUROPEAN DEVELOPMENT BANKS.

OUR ANCESTORS WHO CEDED THE LAND WERE IGNORANT, BUT NEWER GENERATIONS HAVE BECOME AWARE THAT THE COMPANY HAS NOT DONE ANYTHING FOR US FOR OVER A CENTURY!

WE WILL NO LONGER PUT UP WITH IT!
IT'S TIME FOR ACTION!

2007
GEORGE WAS A VILLAGER WHO HAD FIELDS NEXT TO THE PLANTATION.

ONE DAY, COMPANY GUARDS SUSPECT HE WAS STEALING PALM NUTS.

YOU THERE, STOP!

THEY BEAT HIM TO DEATH.
FURIOUS, MATHIEU AND OTHER VILLAGERS GO TO THE COMPANY TO PROTEST.

THE MAN WAS BURIED LIKE A DOG, WITHOUT CoffIN AND NOT EVEN A SHEET.

IF A MAN DIES HERE, CAN YOU NOT EVEN PROPERLY BURY HIM?!

A POLICE OFFICER THEN OPENS FIRE.

IN THE CHAOS, THE VILLAGERS VENT THEIR FEELINGS OF INJUSTICE BY RANSACKING THE OFFICE.

MATHIEU AND OTHERS ARE ARRESTED AND HELD RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DAMAGE.

...AND ARE THEN TRANSFERRED TO THE PROVINCIAL CAPITAL KISANGANI, 250 KILOMETERS AWAY, WHERE THEY ARE HELD FOR 12 DAYS IN THE PROSECUTOR’S OFFICE.

THEY SPEND 3 DAYS IN THE CELL AT THE POLICE STATION AT LOKUTU...
In 2015, company representatives armed with GPS equipment came to mark the boundaries of the plantation.

They did not inform the villagers, and the boundaries are contested. So, the villagers took action.

Give us the schools and health centres you promised!

To make yourself heard, you have to put a tree on the road.

The company then loses income because the palm bunches no longer reach the factory. Then they will be quick to negotiate.

In this case, however, negotiation did not work.

Call in the police. We'll break the blockade by force!

Vroooar

Iiiiiik

Uroooar
The villagers start losing courage, but they do not back down. Next, a delegation of the provincial government arrives to mediate.

But politicians are generally not trusted in the DRC.

The delegation then tries to get Mathieu arrested, accusing him of inciting the population to revolt.

The company refuses to invest in social infrastructure. They hide behind the state, which can exercise force, so that the community does not speak up. They fear me because I dare to speak up without fear and to claim our rights.

Mathieu flees to Kisangani.
In 2018, communities filed a complaint at the German Development Bank, leading to a dispute resolution process.

But not much has happened since.

In 2020, Feronia went bankrupt and was taken over by a private equity fund based in Mauritius.

In February 2021, a delegation of the new investors arrives at the plantation.

The delegation sends company security guards to deal with the protests.

I don’t think things will change in the short term. That’s why we need to keep on fighting!

I am afraid that if we don’t resist, they will take away the little bit of our land that remains. And if I then die, my children won’t have any land. That’s why I fight now, to ensure the future of my children!
This comic is based on field research conducted around the Feronia palm oil plantation in Tsho Po province in North-East DR Congo as part of a British-Academy funded project on “Environmental Defenders and Atmospheres of Violence” (SDP2/100278) hosted by the University of Sussex. The research was carried out by researchers from the Université Catholique du Graben, the University of Sheffield and the Organisation Congolaise des Ecologistes et Amis de la Nature (OCEAN).

The story focuses on people living next to the Feronia concession and how they experience and fight against the company. While the names in the comic are fictional, the described events are based on testimonies we gathered during our field research. This includes accounts of repression and heavy-handed responses by the security services, which highlight the dangers faced by those defending their land, their livelihoods and the environment.