

Press release - 9 September 2024



IVORIAN COMMUNITIES HIRE BELGIAN LAWYERS TO ASSERT THEIR RIGHTS

"We will continue to reclaim our land and our rights", say the communities.

Communities in Côte d'Ivoire are demanding compensation for the damage caused by the activities of the Belgian company SIAT, which specialises in the production of rubber and palm oil. Supported by European human rights organisations, they have appointed Belgian lawyers to present their demands to the company's head office in Zaventem on Monday 9 September.

Land and social conflicts on SIAT's oil palm and rubber plantations have gone on for too long and must be resolved. For more than a decade, communities in Ghana, Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire have risen up to denounce the [many violations of their rights](#) as a result of the SIAT Group's activities. They accuse the company of land grabbing, deforestation, undermining their food security and other human rights violations. According to (local) communities, the company is also complicit in a [crackdown](#) that has resulted in the arbitrary arrest and detention of more than 70 people, led to the death of two people and left dozens injured.

On Monday 9 September at 10:00, a dozen representatives of the Prikro communities in Côte d'Ivoire submitted a claim for compensation [[available here](#)] to the SIAT Group via FIAN and Entraide et Fraternité. They are claiming compensation of more than one billion CFA francs (more than €1.6 million) for all the damage suffered and are positioning themselves as the multinational's first creditors.

"The amount may seem high, but it will never be enough to compensate us for the distress and hell we went through. How can we put a monetary value on the torture we suffered in prison? How can we assess the impact of the months and months of arbitrary detention? How much for not having been able to feed our children for years, for lack of land to cultivate?" testifies a community spokesman, himself arbitrarily detained in prison for more than six months.

Lawyer Pauline Delgrange confirms: *"Our clients have suffered considerable loss and damage as a result of SIAT SA's wrongful activities over a number of years. SIAT SA has an obligation to repair the damage it has caused. This is an unusual approach, but it is well-founded"*.

This Wednesday 11 September, a screening of the new [documentary](#) "Landgrabbed", directed by Magdalena Krukowska, will take place at 5pm at the Maison Européenne des Auteurs et des Autrices in Brussels. The film looks at the struggle of these West African communities against SIAT. The screening will be followed at 6.30pm by a debate on "*The role of the European Union in the Geneva negotiations on a binding United Nations human rights treaty against corporate impunity*", in the presence of representatives of the European Commission, the Belgian government and civil society.

The press is welcome to request a link to preview the film.

Illustration photos (a photo of the actual delivery of the letter will be added at 10.30 am): https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/13W7jHahJp4PI6EYOSEA6QXKY_5mcGKnU?usp=sharing

Background information:

- SIAT specialises in the production of rubber and palm oil. It is one of the five major companies that alone control 75% of the palm oil plantations in Africa. It sells its palm oil-based products to major multinationals such as Unilever (UK) and Nestlé (Switzerland), and its rubber products feed the supply chains of international tyre giants such as Michelin (France) and Goodyear (USA).
- In June 2022, representatives of the communities and the African NGOs that support them (JVE Côte d'Ivoire, JVE Ghana and FoE Nigeria) travelled to Brussels to put pressure on the multinational. Meetings were held with political leaders and an action was organised in front of SIAT's offices. [A letter was delivered to the CEO](#) requesting an on-site meeting with the affected communities. Despite its commitments, [SIAT did not follow up on these meetings](#).
- Still in 2022, and following major financial problems, SIAT decided to close its Ivorian subsidiary in Prikro, in order to sell its long lease on 5,000 ha to Banque NSIA and thus extinguish its debt. At the same time, the company also sold its subsidiaries in Gabon and Cambodia.
- In 2023, the Belgian Vandebecck family, majority shareholder via its holding company Fimave, [sold](#) the group it had created in 1980 to the Nigerian conglomerate SaroAfrica. The deal was finally concluded in March 2024, with Oak & Saffron Limited, a subsidiary of the Nigerian group SaroAfrica, acquiring 86% of the SIAT group for an estimated sum of over €200 million.
- Now under Nigerian control, the company still has important links with Belgium: its head office is still in Zaventem; its Ghent subsidiary [Deroose Plants](#) (specialising in ornamental and tropical crops) is still part of the group, [two Belgian public investors](#) (Société Fédérale de Participations et d'Investissement (SFPIM) and the Flemish public investment company (PMV)) are still linked to the SIAT group; the banks Belfius, KBC and PMV had to waive (part of) their claims as part of the [judicial reorganisation](#) in 2023.
- The Belgian working group "Corporate Accountability" is a coalition of around twenty Belgian civil society organisations, including the two NGO umbrella organisations 11.11.11 and CNCD-11.11.11, the Coalition against Hunger (Coalition contre la faim), three Belgian trade unions (ACLVB-CGSLB, ACV-CSC, ABVV-FGTB) and various NGOs (including FIAN and Entraide et Fraternité). Together, [they are lobbying for effective legislation](#) on due diligence at international, European and Belgian level. CIDSE is collaborating in this [advocacy at UN](#) and European [level](#).

Videos:

- [Trailer](#) for the documentary "Landgrabbed", directed by Magdalena Krukowska, to be screened on 11 September in Brussels.
- [Video](#) "MADE IN IMPUNITY (1/3) Belgian rubber from Côte d'Ivoire" summarising the case (4:33')
- Interviews with representatives of the communities affected:
 - Côte d'Ivoire: [SIAT Lobby Tour 2022: interview with representatives - YouTube](#)
 - Ghana: [Short version: Land Sovereignty in Okumaning, Africa \(Testimonies\)](#)
- Video of the action in front of the SIAT offices: [SIAT Lobby Tour 2022 : Public Action in front of SIAT Office #brussels \(youtube.com\)](#)

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Opportunity for interviews with representatives of affected communities and organisations in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana.

Signatories:

ADDE - Côte d'Ivoire; CIDSE - International; CNCD-11.11.11 - Belgium; Entraide et Fraternité - Belgium; FIAN Belgium; JVE Côte d'Ivoire (Jeunes Volontaires pour l'Environnement - Côte d'Ivoire); JVE Ghana (Jeunes Volontaires pour l'Environnement - Ghana)