

OPEN LETTER FROM ENVIRONMENTAL CIVIL SOCIETY AND HUMAN RIGHTS ACTORS OF THE GREAT VIRUNGA REGION

Subject: Possible oil exploitation projects
in the Greater Virunga landscape
Virunga: Urgent Appeal to the Presidents
Of DRC and Uganda to opt
for the Green economy.

To their Excellencies the Presidents of:
- the Republic of Uganda in Kampala
- the DRC in Kinshasa/Gombe.

Your Excellencies,

We, the Environmental and Human Rights civil society organizations from the Great Lakes region, first, express our deep appreciation for the efforts that you undertake to contribute to the establishment of a climate of peace without which the development of peoples is compromised.

Indeed, Your Excellencies, in your recent meeting of 4th August 2016 held in Kasese-Uganda, your joint statement delivered to the press demonstrated your commitment to abide by the Ngurdoto Tanzania Agreement of 8th September 2007 requiring the two countries to eradicate insecurity and hostilities between Uganda and DR Congo caused by activities of armed groups and other injustices in the region.

However, Your Excellencies, beyond the current good initiative and others such as cross border agreements signed before in 1986, 1990, 1999, 2002, 2003 and with respect for the 1915 agreement between the United Kingdom and Belgium on East African Boundaries that we welcome, the Kasese-Uganda Joint Press Conference, followed the June 2016 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between President Yoweri Museveni and President John Magufuli of Tanzania to commence the building of oil pipelines in October 2016. It should be noted that one of our major concerns with regard to oil projects planned by both countries relate in particular to Ngaji oil Block -on the Ugandan side- and Bloc V -on the DRC side. Both blocks cover almost the entire area of Lake Edward which is a shared Ramsar site from Queen Elizabeth National Park in Uganda and a UNESCO World Heritage and Ramsar site from the DRC Virunga National Park side.

Your Excellencies, oil exploitation is certainly one of the engines that can boost the economy of any country, but do not forget that Tourism contributes as much to and has even proved transformative to the economic growth of countries. Referring to the exceptional case of Uganda: in 2014, tourism contributed 9.9% of Uganda's GDP, which was an increase of 2% from 2013, notwithstanding its contribution the creation of jobs, with a total of 592, 500 jobs created in 2014 compared to 551,100 jobs in 2013.

In addition, our countries not only have laws that prohibit such activities in protected areas but have also freely ratified and domesticated international legal instruments relating to the protection and conservation of these key areas. We must remember that oil exploration or extraction is not

allowed in UNESCO World Heritage sites. Additionally, no activity that could have negative impacts on the Outstanding Universal Values of the World Heritage sites is allowed in neighboring areas; this is in accordance with the World Heritage Convention concerning the Protection of Cultural and Natural Heritage from UNESCO, to which Uganda and the DRC are signatories.

We also recall that Lake Edward drains an important hydrographic network of the Nile Basin and plays several roles:

1. First, **ecological importance**: At a time when the fight against global warming is at the highest level of the community locally, nationally and internationally, it would be paradoxical to carry out polluting activities in or around Lake Edward which is already a very fragile ecosystem. The extent of this pollution upstream the Nile River could affect North African countries as far as the Mediterranean sea and cause water resource-based conflicts from our region to the south of Europe.
2. **Socioeconomic importance**: Lake Edward is rightly regarded as the heart of the local communities that live mainly on fishing from the Ugandan and Congolese sides. This is an activity bequeathed by our ancestors and which cannot be substituted by petroleum operations whose duration is limited and therefore guaranteeing no future for host communities. Indeed thousands of Congolese and Ugandan families living on the banks of Lake Edward have livelihoods based on fishing and their diet is mainly based on fish from the lake, constituting over 90% of the local source of proteins.

Moreover, the unfortunate experience of oil exploitation in developing countries evidenced that local communities remained poor and some of these developing countries are the source of the most important migration to the West. Let us also bear in mind the example of Botswana, which is one of the few African countries that have pursued economic policies supporting diversification of mining. Thanks to this diversification and building on the development of other resources such as tourism, the local economy has been boosted creating new jobs and stimulating real development opportunities for local businesses, consolidating sustainable growth for the country and future generations.

Your Excellencies, all peoples of the world aspire to sustainable development and in our case and considering the above-mentioned facts we urge both countries to:

- Take a firm commitment not to permit any mining or oil concessions/licenses throughout the entire Lake Edward and Greater Virunga Landscape;
- Promote cross-border fishery policies that promote industry sustainability;
- Promote tourism as an economic diversification engine and key for the growth of the local, national and regional economies;

- Set a border policy aimed at prevention of endless border disputes and a clear action plan to fight against illicit trafficking in endangered species and trade in illicit minerals;
- Urgently commission a review to audit the implementation of the Ngurdoto Tanzania Agreement of 8th September 2007 to make recommendations for further action.

Thus, we encourage your Excellencies to consider and respect the people's voices to cancel **and stop the licensing of oil blocks, Block V and Ngaji, located respectively in DRC's Virunga National Park landscape and Uganda's Queen Elizabeth National Park landscape and to focus your efforts to promote a green economy as the only hope to guarantee a better future for both the present and future generations in the region.**

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