



*Open Letter from environmental civil society organizations in  
the Great African Lakes Region to the Heads of State of DR  
Congo and Uganda*

***Petition on the oil exploitation in Lake Edward in DR Congo and Uganda and risk of destruction of ecosystems of the Great African lakes, and UNESCO World Heritage Site Virunga National Park.***

**Excellencies, Heads of Governments (DR Congo and Uganda),**

The environmental and civil society organizations in the region of the Great African Lakes working for the protection of Human Rights and the Environment wish to express deep concern in connection with the decision of the two governments (DR Congo and Uganda) to exploit oil in Lake Edward; we are concerned by the decision taken by the Ugandan government to reallocate oil blocks in Lake Edward, the NGAJI bloc, that shares its boundaries with Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Your Excellencies, Heads of Governments, environmental and civil society organizations in the region of the Great African Lakes, remind your two governments that they are governed by a legal assortment of national and international laws like the RAMSAR Convention and the UNESCO Convention. Furthermore, we remind the two governments that the 1971 UNESCO Convention which was ratified by the DRC in 1974 and Uganda in 1987 calls for the proper conservation of World Heritage sites located in their territory and to this end, states parties signatory to this Convention also undertake "not to take any deliberate measures which might damage directly or indirectly the cultural and natural heritage referred to in Articles 1 and 2 situated on the territory of other States Parties to this Convention."

The granting of concessions in Lake Edward would therefore be a violation of the above and likely to cause extensive environmental damage to the outstanding universal values of Virunga National Park, a UNESCO Natural World Heritage Site.



It is in this context, your Excellencies, Heads of Governments, that both countries should fulfill their commitments made freely and protect transboundary sites such as Virunga National Park (Site UNESCO World Heritage) and Queen Elizabeth National Park including Lake Edward, a RAMSAR and UNESCO World Heritage site, from the risks of oil exploitation activities, namely:

**Ecological Threats:** Lake Edward is a very fragile and vulnerable ecosystem, which requires special responsiveness, facing all forms of pollution especially by hydrocarbons and whose effects are known by all, namely:

1. The destruction of biodiversity in general, through the destruction of the food chain;
2. Water pollution of the Nile Basin causing a potential source of international conflict between the countries that share this basin as far as the Mediterranean Sea, itself already very polluted;
3. This is a nesting area for migratory birds from around the world and home to rare species like the Mountain Gorilla;
4. This is a strategic area that works as a shield against global warming now universally decried.

**Socio-Economic Threats:** Traditional fishing activities on Lake Edward from the Ugandan as well as the Congolese side are the guarantee for sustainable development aspired to by local communities;

Your Excellencies, Heads of Governments, experience in other countries, especially in developing countries, has shown that oil exploitation essentially benefits the multinationals. Thus, poverty, water pollution, the expropriation of land reserved for agriculture and livestock often force people to wander, with destabilizing migrations, as is the case of flows of illegal African and Asian migrants seeking a better life in Europe; majority of these migrants come from oil producing countries.

Worse still, your Excellencies, Heads of Governments, the two governments signed contracts with the oil companies in violation of the upright and indispensable principle of free consultation and prior consent of local communities; the latter being potential victims of this extractive activity.



Your Excellencies, Heads of Governments, continuing to violate the principle of community consent (commonly called FPIC - Free Prior Informed Consent), key decision makers - like you - are creating unnecessary tensions and which are especially dangerous in a post-conflict region like ours. To undertake oil operations in Lake Edward, whichever way it is, is simply a time bomb not only for both countries but also for all humanity, especially as pollution does not have borders and could irreversibly damage Virunga National Park, iconic UNESCO World Heritage site.

While supporting you in finding more active means / resources for the sustainable development of our countries, we encourage you to think about the three pillars of sustainability that any development project should adopt, namely: respect for healthy environment, economic growth and social-community wellness. It is with this legacy that you will be able to leave your successors and citizens viable countries.

In view of the above, the environmental and civil society organizations in the region of the Great African Lakes recommend that Ugandan and Congolese governments:

- Respect the legal texts, with regard to environmental nature protection, contained in their constitutions as well as those of international character which they have freely ratified, as it is the case of the UNESCO Convention of 1971 and RAMSAR convention of 1996.
- Respect their commitments not to take any deliberate measures which might damage directly or indirectly the World Heritage sites situated in their territory or in the territory of other States Parties to this Convention (UNESCO).
- Consult local communities and reflect on the principle of free, prior and informed consent that remains non-negotiable for all projects that may affect the rights of local communities including the right to a healthy environment.
- To collaborate and harmonize ecosystem management of Lake Edward, a common heritage of both countries in order to avoid the destruction of this transboundary vital ecosystem but also to diminish the tensions that could create misunderstanding and conflicts among communities, countries or both.



- Not to accept economic partnerships with companies that do not respect regulatory legal frameworks and that with their activities could affect the outstanding universal values of World Heritage sites.

**Finally, we draw your attention to your responsibility before history and your respective nations. As citizens of these countries, we have fulfilled our duty to alert you; it remains to you to act with full responsibility for the present and future of your country.**

**Done at Goma on the 5<sup>th</sup> of August 2015**



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