

British Company Soco International Accused of Paying Bribes to Silence Opponents of Congo Oil Exploration

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Virunga National Park, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Photo: David Lloyd. Used under Creative Commons license.

Shareholders have demanded that the CEO of Soco International be fired after handwritten receipts for \$42,250 in alleged bribes to Congolese army officials were published by Global Witness. At the time, the UK company was exploring for oil in Virunga, a United Nations World Heritage site in eastern Congo.

Virunga, a 790,000 hectare park (3,000 square miles) that was established in 1925, is home to over 3,000 rare species including the endangered mountain gorilla. Despite national laws that prohibit oil development in the region, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) government [granted oil concessions worth 85 percent of the park to Soco in December 2010](#). Other companies like Total of France and SacOil of South Africa have also been awarded concessions.

International environmental experts and local communities say that pollution from oil drilling will adversely impact Virunga's biodiversity as well as the lives of 50,000 people who depend on Lake Edwards and surrounding lands, many of whom oppose the exploration. (see [CorpWatch background story here](#))

Global Witness says that Soco International paid the money to Major Burimba Feruzi, a military liaison officer to silence opponents. "These documents show that despite Soco's repeated denials the [company has paid tens of thousands of dollars to an army officer accused of bribing and intimidating those trying to stop oil exploration in one of Africa's natural treasures](#). These payments may only be the tip of the iceberg," Nathaniel Dyer, head of the Congo team at Global Witness, said in a press statement.

Charges of military violence against local people have been confirmed by investigators. "Two fishermen were found dead, hours after they had criticised Soco's activities in the park and argued with the soldiers who work alongside Soco," Ida Sawyer, a Human Rights Watch investigator told the Telegraph newspaper. "Many other [fishermen, activists and park rangers have been badly beaten, threatened and intimidated after opposing the oil company's work](#) in the park."

The company claims that the payments to the military were legal. "Soco has [never denied that \[it\] funded the work of the DRC army in providing a security escort](#) to ensure the

personal safety of its staff and contractors during seismic operations, or that Major Feruzi was the DRC army's military liaison officer assigned to Soco's security," Soco International said in a press statement provided to the Guardian newspaper. "However, we strongly refute any suggestion that this funding was in any way improper or connected with alleged acts of intimidation or violence."

At the company annual general meeting earlier this week, Soco International told shareholders that an independent review of the matter by UK lawyers Clifford Chance had pronounced that the [bribery claims were "substantially inaccurate."](#)

When shareholders were asked to vote to retain Rui de Sousa as chairman of the company, [representatives holding 15.1 million shares or 7.59 percent of the company, voted against](#) including Aviva, a UK insurance company, and the Church of England.

Global Witness says that the authorities should pursue the company. "The UK Serious Fraud Office and the US Department of Justice must launch a full investigation into the company's practices in Virunga, especially into whether it breached bribery and corruption laws," Dyer added.

Meanwhile Soco International has announced that it would pull out of Virunga following a massive international public relations backlash - including an [Oscar nominated film](#). "Soco has agreed with WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature) to commit [not to undertake or commission any exploratory or other drilling within Virunga national park](#)," the company wrote last June.

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