

# Cameroon: judicial and administrative harassment of Esu community leaders for opposing an illegal land grab

The Esu community in North-West Cameroon has been subject to systematic and sustained arbitrary judicial and administrative harassment for several years due to their resistance to a huge land grab involving 75% of their communal land. Recently the persecution has increased and the crisis is heading for a violent end. Below is an update on the situation and call for urgent action.

**Redemption Godlove**, a secondary school teacher was arrested from his home in Esu at 2 a.m. on 22/4/2016 by six plain clothes gendarmes and taken to the Gendarmerie Legion in Bamenda for interrogation on trumped up charges of vandalism and arson in relation to grass huts belonging to ELBA Ranch owned by commercial rancher **Baba Ahmadou Danpullo**. Redemption is one of about a dozen youth leaders targeted for intimidation and harassment because of their stance against a land grab by the billionaire rancher. Redemption was transferred from the Legion to Bamenda Central prison where he is awaiting trial.

**Kpwe Philip Abue** a prominent youth leader was arrested by a road patrol police on the 25/5/2016. Abue was travelling from Esu to Bamenda for business as he does regularly when he was stopped and arrested at a routine identity card check point. Abue is languishing in the overcrowded Bamenda Central Prison awaiting trial.

On the 26/5/2016, Abue and Redemption were put under duress inside the prison by the authorities to sign a 'resignation' letter from the Esu Youths Development Association which has been opposed to the land grab of 75% of Esu communal land by Baba Ahmadou Danpullo. The letter was presented by authorities in a pre-trial hearing. Their lawyer objected as it is clearly extracted under duress.

On 24/05/2016, the Fon (traditional ruler) of Esu, **HRH Kum Achuo II** was summoned to Bamenda by **Colonel Beyegue Guy**, Legion Commander of the North-West Region. Fon Achuo II was arraigned before **Njie Mbondo Albert**, Prosecutor-General of the North-West Region, accusing him of arson and vandalism. He has been summoned to Bamenda, far away from his village, three times in less than one month on these trumped up charges. The authorities have been threatening to remove Fon Achuo II as traditional ruler of Esu for refusing to accept bribes and intimidation to cede the land to the commercial rancher. **Benoit William Emvoutou**, Senior Divisional Officer for Menchum has threatened Fon Achou II with arrest if Esu people stage any protests against the land grab. He is being intimidated because he has refused to support the illegal takeover of his village by Baba Ahmadou Danpullo.

On 12/01/2016, **Adolphe Lele Lafrique**, Governor of the North-West Region banned a press conference by the Fon of Esu and their lawyer in violation of their constitutional right.

09/06/2016 three more Esu youth leaders: **Divine Biame**, **Zong Cyprian** and **Bernard Meh Dankawo** were summoned to the Legion of the Gendarmerie in Bamenda and detained on same accusations of arso and vandalism. The Divisional Officer for Fungom **Edward Egbe Forzah** has constantly threatened the youths demanding a written apology from them for allegedly disrespecting his orders.

Even if the charges were valid the right jurisdiction is Menchum Division where the purported crimes took place. But they were instead taken to Bamenda, a different Judicial Division far away from their families. Under Cameroon law a crime is prosecuted under the judicial division where it was committed.

Both Abue and Redemption have been in prison without bail for several weeks in violation of Cameroon laws. The offences for which they are being charged areailable offences.

It is not the first time Esu youth leaders have been arrested. On 9<sup>th</sup> July 2015, **Kpwe Philip Abue**, **Dyfred Ndzo Zang**, **William Meh** and **Oumarou Boub**a were arrested on orders of **Bekondo Brunnette Ebe**, Senior State Counsel for Wum for allegedly violating an injunction order on the disputed land. They were detained in the Public Security Police post in Wum. They were released when Esu population organised a peaceful sit-in in Wum.

All of the arrested are part of a list of nine targeted youth leaders (and the Fon of Esu himself). The targeted are: **Biame Divine, Khagha Mbong Ephraim, Meh Williams, Wung Emmanuel, Fuh Bernard, Meh Ivo and Azong Cyprian**. Others who have not been summoned are targeted through bribery and intimidation and forced to make false confessions to implicate the community leaders.

All of them are being targeted on trumped charges of arson and vandalism. This is rather ironical because on 18<sup>th</sup> January 2016, farm houses belonging to Esu people were burnt down by workers of ELBA Ranch belonging to the land grabber BAD. The matter was reported to the authorities but they took no action. Instead the above are being persecuted for burning of farm houses belonging to themselves?

## **Background**

For 30 years the Esu community has peacefully resisted against the forceful takeover of their communal land by billionaire rancher and member of the Central Committee of the ruling RDPC party. The struggle came to head when the rancher attempted to establish a land certificate in 2015. The Esu village of 35,000 organised peaceful protests. Over 200 people have been displaced by ranch leading to some deaths. The chemicals from the ranch have contaminated the rivers and drinking water of the villagers causing illnesses and deaths. Several people have arrested, tortured and detained for resisting the land grab. He has bribed a number of Esu individuals who are helping him to take over the land.

Baba Ahmadou Danpullo applied for an injunction to stop the Esu villagers from accessing their communal land. The Esu challenged the injunction in court. Mr Danpullo then reinstated the application. Esu filed a case in court demanding that he proves he own the land. To date he has not produced any evidence in court to this effect.

Instead he filed a court case on trumped charges of defamation against Barrister Fon Robert, the lawyer representing Esu community. The lawyer is only doing his job defending the Esu community and it is the first he is directly targeting the lawyer who has won many cases against Danpullo on behalf of the Mbororo community.

In 2015 Mr Danpullo wrote a protest to the President and Prime Minister complaining that the North-West **Governor Adolph Lele Lafrique** is supporting Esu people against him. He published the letter in the national media. The Governor strongly denied the accusations. The Governor organised a field visit to the disputed on 29/12/2015, and set up a commission to look into the land but to date there has been no report from the commission. According to the administrative authorities it is because Mr Danpullo has refused to attend the commission which he is funding to defend his application for a land title.

In a meeting called by **Prime Minister Philemon Yang** on 27/02/2016, in Ayaba Hotel, Bamenda, attended by the Governor, Senior Divisional and Divisional Officers of Menchum & Fungom and all stakeholders, Mr Danpullo declared in the presence of everyone that he has given the Governor of the North-West and other government officials 50 million FCFA but was still waiting for his land certificate.

In February 2016, Baba Ahmadou Danpullo filed a case against **Barrister Fon Robert**, the lawyer for Esu community claiming defamation and 100 million FCFA damages. The matter is still at pre-trial stage.

This is a plea for urgent action to stop the land grab and also judicial and administrative harassment. This conflict will lead violence and possible loss of lives if not stopped now.

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