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A member of the Congolese environmental and human rights organisation RIAO-RDC was brutally killed by a security guard of the Canadian palm oil company Feronia Inc. on Sunday, July 21, 2019, near the company's Boteka plantations in Bempumba, Eqauteur Province, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

The killing follows months of intimidation directed by the company at members of RIAO-RDC, who are supporting local communities in filing a grievance against the company for its occupation of their lands.

Joël Imbangola Lunea was a driver of a motorised boat used to transport people and goods between the villages around Feronia's Boteka plantations and the city of Mbandaka. He was also a community activist and member of RIAO-RDC, and played a particularly important role in ensuring communications between the local communities and RIAO-RDC.

At around 3pm, on Sunday, July 21, 2019, Mr. Joël was transporting several passengers and their luggage on his small boat, when he was approached by Mr. Boketsu Ebuka (alias "Ebola"), a security guard working at Feronia's PHC Boteka plantations. Mr. Ebuka proceeded to beat him and eventually strangled him to death. Mr. Ebuka then threw Mr. Joël's body into the Moboyo River. It is reported that Mr. Ebuka is now in hiding.

The killing takes place in a context of rising tensions between Feronia and the local communities at the company's three different plantation sites in the DRC. RIAO-RDC is working to try to bring a peaceful solution to the conflict. It led a first mediation process in 2017 that was sabotaged by Feronia when the company pulled out of the process after only a couple of weeks. In November 2018, RIAO-RDC began supporting nine affected communities in another mediation process, this time through the International Complaints Mechanism (ICM) of the German, Dutch and French development banks that finance Feronia.

Since this second mediation process was initiated, RIAO-RDC has faced increased efforts by the company to undermine its work with the communities. Managers of the company have publicly blamed RIAO-RDC for the company's non payment of wages to its workers and have sought to discredit RIAO-RDC by accusing the organisation of being an agent for foreign interests. Local members of RIAO-RDC also report that they are facing increased intimidation from Feronia's

security guards.

Mr. Joël accompanied the Director of RIAO-RDC, Mr. Jean-François Mombia Atuku, during the recent visit of the panel of the ICM to the Boteka plantations in May/June 2019. He reported to Mr. Mombia Atuku that he faced increasing harassment from Feronia's security guards and that he was concerned for his safety.

The communities living within and alongside Feronia's plantations are routinely harassed by company security guards who accuse them of stealing oil palm fruits from the plantation, even though these communities have been harvesting palm fruits from their community forests and producing palm oil for generations and long before the arrival of Feronia.

RIAO-RDC has previously informed Feronia and its international funders about this regular harassment of community members at Feronia's plantations and has urged them to take actions to rectify it. RIAO-RDC has also tried unsuccessfully to get local authorities to investigate a previous incident in which a Pygmy couple was killed, after having been accused by Feronia's security guards of having stolen palm fruits from the company's Boteka plantations.

RIAO-RDC is now calling on the relevant authorities of the DRC and on the Governor of Equateur Province in particular to make an immediate investigation into the killing of Mr. Joël. RIAO-RDC is also calling on the relevant international human rights bodies to investigate this incident.

RIAO-RDC holds Feronia Inc to be responsible for Mr. Joël's murder. He was killed by an employee of Feronia, who was carrying out routine duties for the company. Feronia has taken insufficient action over the years to prevent its security guards from harassing local community people over unsubstantiated claims of stealing palm fruits or palm oil. Feronia is also responsible for the increasing harassment and intimidation of RIAO-RDC members by company employees, and its high level managers are responsible for inciting violent action against RIAO-RDC by spreading misinformation about the organisation.

Mr. Joël leaves behind his wife and five children. He was the sole income earner of the family.

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