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Parliamentary Briefing

Westminster Hall debate

Political and human rights situation in the African Great Lakes
Region: Tuesday 13 May 2014; 9.30 to 11am

Summary

- **WWF has been campaigning to draw attention to the threat from oil exploration to the Virunga World Heritage Site in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Over 700,000 people worldwide support the campaign**
- **The UK Government has indicated its opposition to the exploration but we need to encourage the Government to work with other nations to strengthen the call for SOCO, a UK based oil exploration company to leave the Virunga.**
- **There is an alternative route to build the economy and stability of this war torn region, which develops the tourism and small scale use of natural resources. This future ensures the revenues stay in the DRC to the direct benefit of the local communities.**
- **Seismic testing by SOCO is expected to commence shortly – time is running out and urgent action is needed across the world to stop SOCO's actions.**

Virunga

Virunga was the first national park established in Africa, founded in 1925. Its extraordinary landscapes and high level of biodiversity resulted in it receiving World Heritage Site designation by UNESCO in 1979. It is also a Ramsar wetland of international importance and home to one of only two populations of critically-endangered mountain gorillas in the world, as well as chimpanzees, hippos, elephants and countless other species.

Threat

SOCO is exploiting a legal loophole to explore for oil within the park under **scientific research grounds**; currently SOCO is undertaking seismic tests on Lake Edward.

If commercially recoverable oil is found SOCO is expected to move to full-scale oil exploitation, which would require a change to Congolese law and the de-gazetting of a



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The Prince of Wales KG, KT, GCB, OM
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substantial central region of the Virunga National Park. It is likely that the majority of any revenue from oil will leave the country with little or no benefit to local people.

SOCO's activities are not only opposed by the UK Government; many local civil society groups, the German, Belgian and US Governments, UNESCO, UK and European politicians and many others are all actively concerned.

OECD complaint

WWF has filed an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) complaint against SOCO. The complaint claimed that:

- SOCO has hidden from residents who could be impacted, the full details of what could potentially go wrong;
- State security forces have been accused of creating an atmosphere of fear and intimidation at SOCO meetings with the community; and
- SOCO has not respected international treaties aimed at protecting the environment, such as the World Heritage Convention.

The OECD's guidelines are the world's most respected rules governing the activities of international businesses. The response received from the UK National Contact Point for the OECD said that WWF's case has exposed "material and substantiated issues meriting further examination." A mediation process is now underway.

A sustainable future for Virunga

Many of the people working to protect Virunga see that there is an opportunity to bring long-term prosperity to the park without oil. A future based on tourism and sustainable use of the natural resources could bring long-term employment and stability without threatening the biodiversity of the park.

Looking at the potential for growth in tourism revenue, as has occurred in neighbouring parks in Uganda and Rwanda, suggests that Virunga National Park could be the source of:

- 45,000 jobs primarily in tourism, sustainable fisheries and small-scale hydropower;
- tourism revenue estimated at US\$235 million per annum;
- sustainable fisheries (already a vital role in local economy) with a potential future value of US\$90 million per annum.

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