

PRESS RELEASE

OVER 60 ENVIRONMENTAL AND TOURISM GROUPS DEMAND STOP TO NEW OIL DRILLING THREAT TO AFRICA'S OLDEST NATIONAL PARK

Over 60 environmental and tourism groups today called for UNESCO and the governments of Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo to reach a deal to stop new oil drilling licences from being awarded in Virunga National Park and the surrounding area. Groups, including Global Witness, Greenpeace and the Zoological Society of London (ZSL), are warning that a new oil licence, for which the Ugandan government is currently inviting bids, could have a devastating impact on the UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Virunga, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, is home to some of Africa's most iconic and endangered species including some of the world's last remaining mountain gorillas. Next month the Ugandan government will receive bids on six new oil licences, all of which include protected areas and one of which shares a lake with Virunga National Park. Lake Edward is at the heart of Virunga's precious ecosystem, but lies across the Congolese and Ugandan border.

"Drilling for oil in Lake Edward may have a devastating impact on both Virunga and the local people and wildlife in Uganda" said George Boden, a Senior Campaigner at Global Witness and a spokesperson for the group.

"Oil activity in one part of the lake will affect all of it – the wildlife who call the lake home aren't aware of these national borders. There are also over 200,000 people who are dependent on Lake Edward for food. UNESCO and the governments of Uganda and Congo need to act urgently to stop oil exploration in the entire lake for good."

The groups are also calling attention to the potential damage to Uganda's growing tourism sector. Queen Elizabeth National Park, which also forms part of the oil block in question, is responsible for a third of all visits to Uganda's national parks. Tourism currently accounts for 8% of Uganda's GDP.

"Drilling in this area is bad for the environment and bad for business. It may cause irreparable damage to one of Uganda's key tourist attractions and to Uganda's growing tourism sector. Given the global downturn in oil prices Uganda should protect other growing areas of our economy. Lake Edward could be worth a lot more to both countries as an area of outstanding natural beauty," said Onesmus Mugenyi, the Deputy Executive Director at ACODE (Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment) Uganda.

In 2014 British oil company Soco International carried out seismic testing for oil on the Congolese side of Lake Edward, in Virunga, prompting widespread local opposition and an international outcry. The struggle over their oil licence was recorded in the Oscar nominated documentary *Virunga*, which was produced by Leonardo DiCaprio. Following the outcry Soco committed to no further involvement in its oil block in Virunga and announced in November 2015 that it no longer owns the block's licence.

The Congolese government has not commented publicly on the future of oil block 5, which covers Virunga National Park, since Soco's announcement. Global Witness and other NGOs are concerned that the Congolese government may seek to re-draw the boundaries of the World Heritage Site in Virunga in order to allow for drilling in this oil block.

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Notes to Editors:

1. Further information on Global Witness' campaign to prevent drilling in Virunga can be found [here](#).
2. According to the Ugandan Petroleum Authority the deadline of submission of bids by oil companies to the government of Uganda is the 26th of February. 16 companies have been shortlisted. The Ugandan government is issuing six new oil licences all of which include protected areas. The Ngaji block includes the Uganda side of Lake Edward and parts of Queen Elizabeth National Park. More information can be found [here](#).
3. For a map of the areas being allocated in the Ugandan oil licencing round see [here](#).
4. UNESCO wrote to the government of Uganda in August 2015 stating that oil exploration is incompatible with World Heritage Status and reminding them of their obligation to protect sites outside their own jurisdiction. At the time of writing UNESCO had not received a response.
5. In December 2015, the EU Parliament passed a resolution calling for the protection of Virunga from oil activities and noting the significant threat posed by the Ugandan licencing. For more information see [here](#).
6. Global Witness published the report '[Drillers in the Mist](#)' in September 2014, which laid out evidence that British oil company Soco International and its contractors had made illicit payments, appeared to have paid off armed rebels and benefited from fear and violence fostered by government security forces in eastern Congo, as they sought access to Virunga for oil exploration.
7. In June 2015 Global Witness also [published cheques showing](#) that Soco International paid tens of thousands of dollars to a Congolese military officer accused of bribery and of brutally silencing opponents of oil exploration in the park.
8. Soco's controversial quest to explore for oil in eastern Congo was the subject of the Oscar-nominated documentary '[Virunga](#)', produced by Leonardo DiCaprio.
9. The groups who have signed the joint statement are:

Action des Chrétien·s Activistes des Droits de l'Homme à Shabunda (ACADHOSHA) DRC	Descartes Mponge Malasi
Action Coalition for Climate Change	Enock Nimpamya
Advocates Coalition for Development and	Dr. Arthur Bainomugisha

Environment (ACODE)	
Advocates for Natural Resource Governance and Development (ANARDE)	Frank Tumusiime
Africa Institute for Energy Governance (AFIEGO)	Dickens Kamugisha
African Wildlife Foundation	Kaddu Sebunya - President
Association pour le développement des Initiatives paysannes (ASSODIP) - RDC	Janvier Sawakaka
Asyanut Safaris	Babra Adoso Vanhelleputte
Australian Rainforest Conservation Society	Dr Aila Keto. AO - President
Biosphere Expeditions	Dr. Matthias Hammer - Executive Director
Bob Brown Foundation	Jenny Weber
Buliisa Initiative for Rural Development Organisation (BIRUDO)	Paolyel MP Onencan
Civic Response On Environment & Development (CRED)	Bashir Twesigye - Executive Director
CJDH-RDC	Fortunat Maronga
Community Development and Conservation Agency (CODECA)	Asiku Micah
Conservation Action Trust	Francis Garrard - Director
CREDDHO	Semakuba Corneille
Earthworks	Jennifer Krill
Ecological Christian Organisation (ECO Uganda)	Charles Kabiswa
eCountability	Bill Butcher- Director
Elephants Alive	Marlene McCay - Founder and Chairperson
EST	Jean Marie Mangaya
Fauna & Flora International	Mark Rose - Chief Executive Officer
FECOPEILE	Josué Mukura
Gaia Foundation	Liz Hosken
Global Rights Alert	Winfred Ngabiirwe
Global Witness	Patrick Alley - Founder
Greenpeace	Victorine Sirri Che Thöner
Greenwatch	Irene Ssekyana
IDPE	Bantu LUKAMBO
Jeunesse du Monde République Démocratique du Congo	Mr Tibère Kajemba Dunia
Lake Albert Biodiversity Conservation Alert (LABCA)	Mugume Michael
Matoke Tours	Willem Johannes Kok - Managing director
Mid-western region Centre for Democracy & human rights (MICOUD)	Lawrence Kangula
Mutanda Lake Resort	Willem Johannes Kok - Managing director
Nature Uganda	Archilles Byaruhanga
New Eden Christian Foundation	Canon Baluku
New Progressive Alliance	Ed Griffith
Pro-Biodiversity Conservationists in Uganda (PROBICOU)	Robert Tumwesigye
Publish What You Pay – Uganda (PWYP-U)	Noreen Nampewo - National Coordinator
Rainforest Action Network	Lindsey Allen - Executive Director

Rainforest Foundation Norway	Lars Løvold - Director
Rainforest Foundation UK	Simon Counsell - Executive Director
RCGW	Kisuba Muliro Rousseau
Real Agency for Community Development(RACD)	Banturaki Benard
Road Free	Kriton Arsenis - Founder
Save the Elephants	Iain Douglas-Hamilton - Founder & CEO
Save Virunga	Save Virunga Team
SEA DRC	Paul Kasereka
SORADEC	Espoir Shekihumi
South Western Institute for Policy & Advocacy (SOWIPA)	Ben Tumwesigye
SVAN	Mme Masika Tulinabo
Synchronicity Earth	Laura Miller – CEO
The Wild Foundation	Vance G. Martin
Transparency International Uganda	Peter Wandera
Union D'etude Pour La Conservation De La Nature (UECN)	Jonas Pandasi - Executive Director
UFAREP	Janvier Kaikolo
Voluntary Initiative Support Organisation (VISO)	Daniel Abowe
Water Governance Institute	Henry M Bazira
World Heritage International	Tony Sadownichik - Chair of Board of Directors
Zevin Asset Management	Sonia Kowal
Zoological Society of London (ZSL)	Jonathan Baillie - Conservation Programmes Director