

7 October 2014
Port Harcourt, Nigeria

PRESS STATEMENT

**FORCED EVICTION AND LAND GRAB-AFFECTED
COMMUNITIES IN RIVERS STATE PREPARE FOR
NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION SITTING
PROMISED FOR NOVEMBER 2014**



**JUSTICE & EMPOWERMENT
INITIATIVES – NIGERIA**

Even with divisive elections looming, at least one thing is bringing together diverse communities across Rivers State – experience of the hardships of forced eviction and land grab by the State Government and a common quest for justice.

Since September 2013, a number of communities across the state have petitioned the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) over large-scale demolitions and forceful takeovers of land in Rivers State. Many had previously attempted to seek justice through the courts, but had been sorely disappointed by a judiciary that seemed unable or unwilling to counter the power of the Rivers State Government.

Now these diverse communities have come together to form a coalition to rally for justice and work toward a common cause – an end to forced evictions in the state. This coalition is comprised of victims of forced eviction at Agip/U.S.T. waterfront (2004-2005), victims of forced eviction at Njemanze waterfront (2009), victims of forced eviction at Abonnema Wharf waterfront (2012), and victims of a large-scale land grab affecting Sogho, Ueken, and other communities in Ogoniland (ongoing).

Justice & Empowerment Initiatives (JEI) is leading a group of NGOs that support this coalition in its struggle. Others include Social Action, Center for Human Rights and Development (CEHRD), Stakeholder Democracy Network (SDN), the Collaborative Media Advocacy Platform (CMAP), the Movement for Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), and Ogoni Solidarity Forum (OSF).

The coalition's hope for justice after many years of impunity and suffering stems from the NHRC's 2013 decision to constitute a Panel of Inquiry on Demolitions and Forced Eviction that has been sitting in Lagos, Port Harcourt, and Enugu.

"We laud the Commission's bold decision to face the nationwide issue of land grab and forced eviction. These issues are a veritable pandemic in Lagos, Rivers, the FCT, and elsewhere across the country and, too often, victims have nowhere to turn for protection and effective remedy," says Megan Chapman, a co-founder of JEI.

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The cases against Rivers State were first heard during the Panel's May 2014 sitting in Port Harcourt. Two of the cases came up again in Enugu on 2 October 2014 for hearing of urgent applications for interim protection measures to prevent ongoing takeover of lands in Ogoniland and commercial development of Abonnema Wharf.

Victims who had traveled the long road to and from Enugu for the 2 October hearing took hope at the NHRC Panel's promise to return to Port Harcourt in November. Among these were victims from Zor Sogho and Ueken Tai, two of the communities impacted by the seizure of a large swath of Ogoni farmlands for a commercial banana plantation by a Mexican foreign investor, and two victims of the 2012 demolition of Abonnema Wharf waterfront in Port Harcourt.

Outside the Federal High Court in Enugu, Mbale Saturday from Zor Sogho reflected, "Let the Commission do as they have promised. If they can fulfill their promise, it is good to God. The promise they have promised us today has restored our hope. They have said they will come to Port Harcourt the second or third week of November. Whichever! Provided that they will not delay beyond that. They should come exactly as they have promised so that we will know that they are really our godfather who is redeeming us from the hands of the wicked."

Godfrey Kpoobee of Ueken Tai joined with him, "When I reach home, I will call my people and inform them that our matter is adjourned to November in Port Harcourt. We are farmers and we cannot allow our land to be given to Government. Because of the land grab, our people are suffering. So we are coming to the Commission so that they can order the Rivers State Government to clear the [banana plantation] and pay compensation for what they have destroyed."

"The Commission has given me hope today. They showed that they are human beings. I believe that if something like this happened to them, they would feel it as we are feeling it. They will make sure that all documents concerning the matter come up before they return to Port Harcourt in November," said Kpoobee.

On 6 October, those returning from Enugu met with a large gathering other members of the coalition of forced eviction and land grab-affected communities in Port Harcourt to relay the news. Despite the public holiday, the coalition was a flurry of discussion as members began to plan toward the November hearings, including how they will organize sessions for witnesses to practice giving testimony, etc.

"Ten years after the demolition of Agip/U.S.T. waterfront, we are still waiting for justice; but our hopes are in the Commission, said Edwin Lenyie, a coalition leader. "We, the poor, will no longer sit by as the rich and powerful take over our homes," vowed Jim Tom-George, another coalition leader from Abonnema Wharf.