



KEY ELEMENTS OF THE DECISION AGAINST SOCO

Expert interviews, the original complaint and park images are available by contacting Alona Rivord at arivord@wwfint.org or +41 79 959 1963. Additional information and resources are available at panda.org/virungainfo.

ABOUT THE DECISION

A United Kingdom Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) agency today is opening a formal examination into the activities of Soco International PLC after WWF raised serious human rights and environmental concerns about the company. The OECD agency has decided to examine whether Soco has violated its obligations under the Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises in the course of its oil exploration in Virunga National Park, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

The agency has accepted for further inspection the allegations made in WWF's complaint, which exposes reports of intimidation, undisclosed health and environmental impacts, sub-standard contract provisions, and potential violations of national and international law. In the initial assessment made public today, WWF's case was found to have raised "material and substantiated" issues warranting deeper scrutiny.

WWF believes that the allegations against Soco reveal a company that is acting irresponsibly and in breach of the world's most respected corporate standards. Soco is putting at risk the outstanding universal value of a World Heritage Site and posing a threat to the people who depend on it for food, freshwater and their incomes.

The UK, Germany, Belgium, European Union and UNESCO have all publicly objected to Soco's operations in Virunga, yet the company continues to press ahead with oil exploration. Local civil society has mobilized against the company, and globally over 600,000 people have joined WWF to demand that Soco leave the park.

ALLEGED VIOLATIONS

[WWF's complaint against Soco](#) presents powerful evidence of questionable dealings by the company in DRC. The complaint alleges that:

- Soco has hidden from residents who could be impacted by oil exploration the full details about what could potentially go wrong. A company document made public in WWF's complaint outlines over 30 potential impacts oil exploration could have on peoples' health and on the environment. In it, Soco warns of habitat loss, invasive species, poaching, pollution, diseases and loss of fishing jobs.
- State security forces present at Soco community meetings have created an atmosphere of fear and intimidation. Community activists say they have been threatened and unlawfully detained, though they bravely continue to express publicly their concerns about pollution harming vital fish stocks, damaging crops, and contaminating drinking water. Over 50,000 people rely on Virunga National Park for food and freshwater, according to research conducted by Dalberg Global Development Advisors for WWF.
- Soco is exploiting a legal loophole in DRC law that expressly prohibits drilling in protected areas like Virunga. It is also illegal under national law to pollute the park's waters, disturb wildlife, destroy plants or introduce alien species, all impacts described by Soco as being possible.
- Both OECD and the UN urge corporations operating places of weak governance, such as eastern DRC, to conduct rigorous human rights due diligence. Soco has failed to identify and prevent potential human rights

impacts resulting from its activities. Historical evidence shows that oil exploitation in areas of weak governance can heighten ethnic tensions and fuel conflict.

- Soco has failed to respect the provisions of international treaties aimed at protecting human rights and the environment, such as the World Heritage Convention. The World Heritage Committee objects to Soco's exploration in Virunga and has requested the cancelation of all oil permits.
- Soco's contract contains a so-called "full freezing" stabilization clause that effectively exempts the company from future laws or regulations that could be put into place to better protect human rights and the environment. There is widespread consensus among industry experts against such extreme clauses. A UN human rights panel concluded in 2008 that they "should be eliminated from practice."

Now that issues raised in WWF's OECD complaint have been accepted, the agency will facilitate a dialogue between WWF and Soco over the coming weeks. In those discussions, WWF will press the company to withdraw immediately from Virunga National Park.

ABOUT THE OECD AND THE GUIDELINES

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development is an intergovernmental group of [34 member countries](#) that have joined together "to promote policies that will improve the economic and social wellbeing of people around the world," according to its [mission statement](#). OECD was established in 1961.

[The OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises](#) is the world's most comprehensive standard on corporate social responsibility. In total, 45 countries ascribe to the guidelines, which apply to the activities of companies based in, or operating in, their countries.

The guidelines consist of principles for responsible business conduct in areas such as employment relations, human rights, environment, information disclosure and combating bribery. Any interested party can file an OECD complaint if it believes a company is in violation of corporate obligations prescribed by the guidelines.

WWF's complaint against Soco specifically addressed alleged breaches by the company of OECD rules related to social and environmental impacts, national laws and international treaties, transparency and human rights.

ABOUT VIRUNGA NATIONAL PARK

Virunga is Africa's oldest and most biodiverse national park. Founded in 1925, the park was recognized by UNESCO for its outstanding natural value and inscribed as World Heritage Site in 1979. It is best known for its active volcanoes and wealth of unique species that are found nowhere else. Virunga is the only park in the world home to three different kinds of great apes, all of which are endangered.

In 2007, 85 per cent of Virunga National Park was allocated as oil concessions by DRC government, but Soco is the only company pursuing oil exploration within the World Heritage Site. Concession holder Total SA of France last year pledged to remain outside the park's boundaries. Soco is traded on the London Stock Exchange and is a component of the FTSE 250 index.

The UK foreign office has repeatedly [voiced its opposition](#) to Soco's activities in Virunga. Additionally, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee has [called for the cancellation of all oil permits](#) in the park stating that oil exploitation and mining are incompatible with the World Heritage Convention.

[An independent economic analysis of Virunga](#) commissioned by WWF found that the park could grow in value to US\$1.1 billion per year with investment in sustainable development. Its fisheries, hydropower plants and ecotourism industry have the potential to generate 45,000 permanent jobs for nearby residents. Oil exploitation is not likely to provide many employment opportunities and puts at risk the fishing livelihoods of thousands.