



European Parliament

27 March 2012

cc: Commissioner Vassiliou
Commissioner Potočnik

Dear Commissioner Piebalgs,

Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Africa's oldest national park, a World Heritage Area under the UNESCO Convention, and home to the last mountain gorillas, is under imminent threat. Ignoring the UNESCO World Heritage Convention and the country's own state law, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has issued UK based oil company SOCO International two permits to start oil explorations in Virunga National Park. We, as Members of the European Parliament, are highly alarmed by this development.

The UNESCO World Heritage Committee has expressed its deep concern on the granting of the petroleum exploration permit in an area covering part of the territory of the property, and considers petroleum exploration and exploitation to be incompatible with World Heritage status. The Committee has urged the State Party to cancel any petroleum exploration permit within the boundaries of the property. It is also important to note that oil and mining exploration and exploitation are specifically prohibited in the protected areas of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) by the Public Order Act of 1969 on the conservation of nature and by the Mining Code of 2002.

Located in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Virunga National Park was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1979. In 1996 it became a protected wetland under the international wetlands convention – the RAMSAR Convention. Virunga National Park contains the greatest diversity of habitats of any park in Africa. The park's mountain gorillas, other mammals like hippopotamus and numerous bird species increasingly allow the local community to generate income from tourism. Moreover the park's ecosystems provide critical services such as freshwater and fish to 50.000 people.

Under the 10th European Development Fund, the European Commission currently provides 10 million euro to support the DRC government through the ICCN – Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature - to conserve and manage the 7,800 square kilometres park. Other EU Member States also support wildlife and protected area management in this area of Africa. Technical assistance has been provided by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the Frankfurt Zoological Society and others. See <http://gorillacd.org/>, the official website of the Virunga Park.

National and international efforts to improve nature and livelihoods in Virunga National Park are now threatened by the oil exploration permits granted by the DRC government, allowing the acquisition of aeromagnetic and aerogravimetric data by SOCO International in block V of the park. These latest developments go against a commitment made by the government of DRC to hold off any further activities until the Strategic Environmental Impact Assessment (SEIA) is fully completed and discussed between the various stakeholders. The SEIA, commissioned and partly funded by the European Union, is due in late 2012.

See <http://whc.unesco.org/en/news/849>

IUCN, the International Union for Conservation of Nature and UNESCO fear that current and past investments by the international community will largely go to waste should oil explorations in the park commence. 85 Percent of Virunga National Park has been included in the oil concessions. IUCN and UNESCO call for a definitive suspension of all oil exploration or exploitation within this World Heritage site.

Considering the serious impacts of oil exploration in Virunga National Park for nature and livelihoods, and the fact that such activities would go against international agreements and national legal decisions, we call on you to urge SOCO International and other companies, as well as the government of the Democratic Republic of Congo to comply with the commitments of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention and the requirements of national DRC legislation regarding this matter.

Yours sincerely,

Gerben-Jan Gerbrandy

Kriton Arsenis

Catherine Bearder

Sandrine Bélier

Thijs Berman

Kathleen Van Brempt

Michael Cashman

Ricardo Cortés Lastra

Chris Davies

Anne Delvaux

Bas Eickhout

Catherine Grèze

Fiona Hall

Jo Leinen

Corinne Lepage

Judith Merkies

Vladko Panayotov

Sirpa Pietikäinen

Rovana Plumb

Pavel Poc

Vittorio Prodi

Frédérique Ries

Daciana Sarbu

Judith Sargentini

Carl Schlyter

Horst Schnellhardt

Bart Staes

Struan Stevenson

Claudiu Ciprian Tănăsescu

Marita Ulvskog

Åsa Westlund