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## The Human Cost of Environmental Protection in Côte d'Ivoire

Government Evicts Cocoa Farmers from Mont Péko National Park



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“The government wants to starve us,” an Ivorian traditional leader told a local human rights researcher, describing what happened after the government evicted tens of thousands of cocoa farmers from nearby Mont Péko national park in July.

The displacement of these farmers – the bulk of whom have moved to villages bordering the park – led the Ivorian Coalition of Human Rights Actors (Regroupement des Acteurs Ivoiriens des Droits Humains, RAIDH) to today warn that the operation “puts at risk food security, health and social cohesion in the area.” The influx of displaced farmers, who have lost the cash crops they depended on to feed their families, has meant that several towns and villages have seen their populations more than double.

Restoring Mont Péko, a 34,000-hectare national park that has been devastated by small-scale cocoa farming, typifies the dual challenges the Ivorian government faces in conserving forests and the endangered chimpanzees, forest elephants, and other animals that live there, as well as respecting the rights of communities that rely on forests for their survival.

Côte d'Ivoire – which at one point reportedly had the highest rate of deforestation in Africa – saw its forest decline from 50 percent of the national territory in 1900 to less than 12 percent in 2015. To help protect the country's biodiversity and combat climate change, the Ivorian government has committed to return at least 20 percent of its territory to forest.

But measures to protect the environment, such as the protection of national parks, should not come at the expense of the rights of those who live there. International law protects anyone who occupies land from forced evictions that either do not provide adequate notice or do not respect the dignity and rights of those affected, regardless of whether they occupy the land legally.

Human Rights Watch and RAIDH in June documented how Côte d'Ivoire's forestry agency evicted farmers from forests without warning and without giving them alternative housing or land. “Without our land, I don't know what we're going to do,” one farmer said. “We don't even have enough food to give us the energy to work.”

“I still haven't gotten back on my feet,” said a woman who was evicted in June 2015. “I have trouble feeding my children, and they are not going to school anymore.”

Other research by RAIDH in Mont Péko suggests that while farmers were told that evictions were planned, the government failed to ensure that villages bordering Mont Péko could shelter and feed those displaced, even if temporarily.

An August 11 UN report concluded that the infrastructure in communities surrounding Mont Péko was “largely insufficient” to accommodate those evicted, and that social, health and education services were “overwhelmed.”



A farmer evicted from the Mont Peko National Park walks in the remains of his village that was destroyed during an eviction operation of farmers inside the Mont Peko National Park in Duekoue department, western Ivory Coast August 1, 2016.

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As Côte d'Ivoire restores its forests, it should work harder to balance the human cost of evictions with the environmental imperatives. When relocating communities is the only option, the government should ensure that those displaced have the food and basic services that they need.

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- [Africa](#)
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### Topic

- [Environment](#)

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- [4] <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/06/13/cote-divoire-arbitrary-evictions-protected-forests>
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