

Press Release

Korean CSOs call on Korean Government and corporations to take immediate measures to stop serious deforestation and human rights violations in the palm oil industry

May 20, 2019

Seoul, South Korea

- Korea Federation for Environmental Movements (KFEM) and Advocates for Public Interest Law (APIL) condemn the current practice of human rights violation and environmental destruction prevalent in the palm oil industry in Indonesia and highlight the importance of responsibility on the part of the Korean Government and South Korean corporations.

On May 20, 2019 Korea Federation for Environmental Movements (KFEM) and Advocates for Public Interest Law (APIL) released “Does Spring Come to Stolen Forests”, a comprehensive report on the current state of the palm oil industry in Indonesia, the human rights violations taking place in the industry and the complicity of South Korean corporations.

Palm oil is an edible vegetable oil that has the highest yield of oil per unit area of land. It is widely used in shampoo and cosmetic products, and in processed foods such as instant noodles and snacks. The use of palm oil in the production of biodiesel fuel has also led to a sharp increase in the global demand for palm oil. Korea tripled its palm oil imports over the last ten years, importing 606,947 tons in 2018, mainly from Malaysia and Indonesia.

This increase in demand for palm oil has resulted in an explosive expansion of palm oil plantations. Indonesia, one of the biggest producers of palm oil, is witnessing a rise in public concern over large-scale environmental destruction and human rights violations taking place as a result of palm oil plantations.

Kurniawan Sabar, Director of the Institute for National and Democracy Studies (INDIES) in Indonesia, visited Korea for the release of the report and asserted, “Areas where there are palm oil plantations are experiencing not only environmental problems such as forest destruction and arson, but also land disputes, lack of clean water, pollution and other serious issues that threaten local residents right to life. Oil palm plantation workers are also exposed to dangerous working conditions such as the use of the toxic herbicide, Gramoxone, which is banned from use in other countries. Plantation laborers are exploited, working long hours for low wages, and children are often recruited to help with the work.”

Samsung C&T, LG International, POSCO DAEWOO, and Daesang Group, the food division of which is Chungjungone, are some of the Korean corporations that currently run palm oil plantations in Indonesia. Environmental destruction, land disputes with local residents and infringement of labor rights have all occurred in relation to the palm oil plantations being operated by these corporations. Hye Lyn Kim, Coordinator for International Solidarity at KFEM, stated, “For many years the Korean-owned Indonesian conglomerate KORINDO Group and the Korean

corporation POSCO DAEWOO have been criticized by international society for tropical deforestation, forest fires to clear land and land disputes with local residents. These issues have also cost these companies numerous clients and investors.”

Yet the Korean Government has neglected to take measures against the environmental destruction and human rights violations being committed by the palm oil operations of Korean corporations. Instead the government has provided loans for those entering the Indonesian palm oil industry in the name of supporting overseas agricultural and forest resource development. Shin Young Chung of APIL pointed out, “Such loan support for corporations is in direct contradiction to the recommendation of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 2017 that the Korean Government consider issues such as environmental destruction and human rights violation when approving public loans or public aid.”

KFEM and APIL urge Korean corporations in the Indonesian palm oil industry to a) adopt and implement NDPE (No Deforestation, No Peat, No Exploitation) policies; b) demonstrate the legitimacy of their business by making official documents publicly available; and c) return land to community ownership and provide remedies for the infringements on the rights of local communities and laborers. KFEM and APIL demand that the Korean Government a) educate Korean corporations entering the Indonesian palm oil industry to recognize risk factors in terms of the environment, and human and labor rights and to devise safety measures; and b) when approving public loans to support overseas agricultural and forest resource development, carry out an assessment on whether there is a risk of the business being involved in environmental destruction and human rights violations.

The full report can be found on the KFEM and APIL websites.

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