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"When Ants Unite..."

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Distinctly Catholic

"When ants unite their mouths, they can carry an elephant," says an African proverb. I discovered that proverb in a press release from the Africa Faith & Justice Network applauding the decision of the government in Cameroon to halt the activities of a multinational company, Herakles Farms, which was clearing forests to create a palm oil plantation.

The charges against Herakles include paying workers lower wages than they were legally entitled to, destroying a "high conservation value forest," and disrupting the local community. "What's really unique about this [instance] is the web of lies and deceit," Samel Ngiuffo, director of the Center for Environment and Development, a Cameroonian NGO, told reporters. "It's not just to consumers? it's to investors and the Cameroonian government."

Unfortunately, land grabs by multinational corporations in Africa are not that unique and many of them are accompanied by a bodyguard of lies. Herakles presented its work as an effort to help Africa, even forming a special development group "All for Africa," that claimed the plantation would be environmentally sustainable and assist local communities. But, many companies adopt similar public postures, both to the general public and to investors, even while their actual activities have many and varied negative effects on the continent.

I profiled the group Africa Faith & Justice Network in the print edition of NCR a couple of years ago. The organization, with few staff and a smaller budget, work with religious orders in Africa to gather information and use that information to inform the U.S. government "and the U.S. people" about threats to justice and peace on the continent. They are at the forefront of the fight against land grabs in which large companies descend upon desperately poor people and buy their land at a pittance and then exploit

the resources of the land in ways that will harm the African people for generations.

Land grabs are not the only nefarious activities being conducted by large companies in Africa. The Somali pirates got their start as fishermen who had to contend with Western companies dumping toxic wastes in their fishing waters, killing their fish. When the world turned a blind eye to the practice, the fisherman turned a blind eye to the law too, and became pirates.

We think of the age of colonialism as ending in the post-World War II era, but with a globalized economy, and enormous disparities of wealth between the West and the global South, the age of colonialism has simply continued in a different form. I am not so naïve as to think that globalization is an entirely negative phenomenon, but I think it is equally naïve not to consider the new, and in some ways more insidious challenges to the basic human rights of people living in the global South that globalization invites and encourages.

Our neo-con and libertarian friends believe it is the role of government to guarantee property rights and to enforce contracts, and that's about it. But, as the action by the Cameroonian government evidences, it also falls to government to set limits to property rights and to monitor contracts which may or may not have been negotiated in good faith. Additionally, the idea of a group of African farmers having the capability to freely negotiate with a powerful multi-national corporation makes a mockery of the word "free" in the phrase "free market." People who are in desperate living situations are not free. They cannot afford lawyers to advise them. They cannot attempt to buy off corrupt officials. Large Western multinational corporations have all these arrows in their quiver.

Just as importantly, and here we see echoes of the ideological battles that afflict the U.S., it is the role of government to pursue the common good and sometimes that means putting limits on the power of concentrated wealth which seeks only its own profit. Pope Francis has been quite clear on this theme, encouraging political leaders to defend the common good and challenging those who shirk that responsibility.

The fight in Cameroon is little different from the basic political struggle that has shaped progressive politics in the United States. I have quoted this before, but it always bears repeating:

American democracy has come to accept the struggle among competing groups for the control of the state as a positive virtue — indeed, as the only foundation for liberty. The business community has been ordinarily the most powerful of these groups, and liberalism in America has been ordinarily the movement on the part of the other sections of society to restrain the power of the business community.

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Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. wrote those words in his seminal book, "The Age of Jackson." The government of Cameroon's decision to halt the predatory activities of Herakles Farms stands in a long tradition, the tradition of "the movement on the part of other sections of society to restrain the power of the business community." It is a proud tradition as well as a long one, and as Catholics and liberals, we should do everything in our power to see that tradition firmly planted in the soil of Africa and the global South. The Africa Faith & Justice Network is doing its part. Politically engaged Catholics must do theirs too, either by monitoring these issues or helping the AFJN to do so.

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