# Resolution on the protection of the Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo

2015/2728(RSP) - 17/12/2015 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted a resolution tabled by the Committee on Development on the protection of the Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

It is recalled that the Virunga National Park (VNP), located in the Provinces of North-Kivu and 'Province Orientale' of the DRC on the border with Rwanda and Uganda, is **Africa's oldest national park and a UNESCO World Heritage Site**, and is globally renowned for its unique habitats and rich biodiversity, making it the most biodiverse park in Africa. The park is, in particular, renowned for its mountain gorillas, a critically endangered species listed in Appendix I of the 1973 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).

According to the 2013 WWF report entitled 'The economic value of Virunga park', the Virunga National Park currently has an annual economic value of USD 48.9 million.

Despite its status as protected wilderness, the park has been under threat for decades by armed groups that engage in poaching, deforestation and other forms of unsustainable and illegal resource exploitation.

As a result, Virunga has been included on the List of World Heritage Sites in Danger.

Moreover, despite the DRC's law prohibiting environmentally harmful activities in protected areas, in December 2007, **the DRC Government granted oil concessions covering 85 % of the park**. SOCO International plc (SOCO) is so far the only company to have explored the park. SOCO's exploration licence exploits an exemption in that law that allows for 'scientific activities' in protected areas.

Against this background, Parliament stressed the **absolute need to prevent irreversible damage to the VNP** occurring as a result of the exploration and exploitation of oil or other illegal activities. Parliament also deplored the fact that the VNP has also become one of the most dangerous places in the world when it comes to wildlife conservation.

The resolution deemed it **unacceptable that oil concessions in the VNP were granted in 2007 to the French oil company TOTAL and the British oil company SOCO International**, in violation of the Paris Convention on the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage, the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity, the Ramsar Convention and Congolese law.

The concession that SOCO has been exploring is located in and around Lake Edward, an area which is home to dozens of iconic (and some endangered) species, including chimpanzees, elephants, crocodiles and lions. Members called therefore, on SOCO International plc and its DRC-registered company to **stop all exploration and exploitation within Virunga permanently and to respect the park's current boundaries**. They also called on the DRC Government to cancel the oil exploration permits granted within the property of Virunga National Park, as requested by the World Heritage Committee.

Moreover, stressing that since the early 1990s, conflicts with armed guerrillas who live inside and around the park have resulted in serious breaches of human rights and much of the violence, the resolution urged the DRC Government to **disarm rebels and restore security in the park region.**

The European External Action Service is called upon to:

- **coordinate a diplomatic response** from the EU Member States and other potential donors active in the DRC, with a view to helping the DRC Government reject oil exploration and exploitation within the boundaries of the park, cancel the oil exploration permits granted within the property of the VNP, as requested by the World Heritage Committee, and in the other Congolese UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and to reject changes to, and the reduction of, the park's boundaries;
- take all necessary initiatives to persuade the DRC Government to **investigate acts of violence against human rights defenders active in the DRC**, especially in the VNP and including VNP wardens;
- take all necessary measures to ensure that the UK's Serious Fraud Office as the primary jurisdiction and any other relevant jurisdiction fully investigate all bribery and **corruption allegations** put before it regarding SOCO International plc and its DRC-registered company SOCO Exploration and Production DRC SPRL (SOCO).

Parliament called on the Commission and the Member States to:

- uphold the integrity of the park, for example by increasing its commitment to **funding sustainable conservation and economic development and diversification of the surrounding region**. The EU should support the DRC Government in developing sustainable energy and economic alternatives to extractive industries, in improving the mobilisation of domestic resources, especially through fair and progressive tax systems, in governance, and in combating poaching, illegal logging, illegal mining and corruption;
- take legally binding measures to **effectively hold accountable companies** that have been proven to circumvent national laws and international treaties, in particular the codes of conduct detailing social and environmental performance standards, as well as instruments such as ILO Convention 169, the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises and the Guiding Principles of the United Nations on Business and Human Rights;
- take effective action to further **address the root causes of armed conflicts and corruption**, and to support sustainable development and peace-building strategies and projects in the VNP and in the surrounding region.

Lastly, Parliament urged the Commission, the Member States, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the oil companies interested in drilling for oil to protect the current borders and neighbouring areas of the VNP from the exploitation of fossil fuels.