

Contacts:

Jonathan Kaufman, Executive Director, Advocates for Community Alternatives

jonathan@advocatesforalternatives.org

+233 55 555 0377

Liberian Human Rights Defenders In Hiding After Government Crackdown

November 5, 2016 – Monrovia, Liberia - Community advocates and organizers from Green Advocates International, a leading Liberian human rights and environmental organization, are in hiding following a crackdown by government officials over the past week. These actions undermine the Liberian government's efforts to build a pro-democratic, pluralistic society intent on overcoming the challenges of corruption and civil strife.

Visibly drunk and belligerent policemen in plain clothes arrived at the offices of Green Advocates on Friday afternoon to arrest Green Advocates leader Alfred Brownell. Having failed to find Cllr. Brownell at work, in the ensuing days, police officers harassed Green Advocates staff and their family members at their homes and at the office. Cllr. Brownell's uncle, John Brownell, was arrested and forced to pay a fine to secure his own release. Fearing for their lives and freedom, at least four Green Advocates employees – including Cllr. Brownell – are currently in hiding with their families, and the organization has suspended all activities.

The original police action was purportedly to execute a writ of arrest against Cllr. Brownell for contempt of court, claiming that he failed to respond to a subpoena requiring his testimony in the war crimes prosecution of Gus van Kouwenhoven, a Dutch arms dealer who allegedly supplied weapons to the Charles Taylor government during the Liberian Civil War. Cllr. Brownell has previously provided support to the van Kouwenhoven case but had never received the original subpoena to give testimony, and none of the other Green Advocates staff who were threatened were named in any subpoena at all.

Green Advocates staff believe that the Liberian Government is using the van Kouwenhoven prosecution as a pretext to silence their activities. "The attempted arrests and harassment of our staff are just the government's latest repressive reaction to our organization's work," said Cllr. Brownell. "They want to stop us from defending communities suffering human rights abuses associated with foreign investments in the palm oil, rubber, and mining sectors that the government has strongly promoted."

In just the past two years, Green Advocates allies in communities that have lost land to palm oil and rubber plantations have been arrested, tortured, and – in one case – died in prison. Green Advocates personnel have been under surveillance, their phones have been tapped, and their offices have been raided. On one occasion, a Green Advocates team was attacked in the field by people wearing the uniform of a company that was a target of the organization's advocacy, and local police declined to provide protection.

Seen in this context, the events of the past week fit a pattern radically at odds with the democratic, stable image that Liberia has tried to build since the end of civil war thirteen years

ago. “I hope that the government will drop all charges and end its harassment of all community rights defenders,” urged Brownell. “Liberia should let the police go back to their core task of protecting Liberian citizens, rather than squelching criticism of the government or pandering to the interests of multinational companies.”