Open Letter
Of the Environmental Civil Society in the African Great Lakes Region
addressed to
United States President BARACK OBAMA
for the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit (Washington D.C. August 4-6, 2014)

Civil Society organizations in the African Great Lakes Region working on the environmental protection and the rights of local communities confronted with extractive industries in their respective countries, welcome the president’s decision to hold the August 4-6 “US-Africa” summit, which will focus on trade and investment in Africa and highlight the relationship of the United States in the African continent.

While recognizing the importance of existing initiatives such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act, Trade Africa, Power Africa, Feed the Future, and the establishment of the Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders Initiative, we encourage an investment policy based on sustainable development that takes into account environmental protection, economic growth and respect for the rights of local communities.

As of today, Virunga National Park (Virunga), a World Heritage and Ramsar site with Lake Edward, is undoubtedly a source of livelihood for a large part of the population of North Kivu (nearly 5 million) that depend directly or indirectly on fisheries resources and benefits the conservation of Virunga National Park. Unfortunately, this key conservation area is under threat because of oil exploration and exploitation activities. The main danger coming from the British oil company SOCO International plc which started exploration activities in the park, challenged by several stakeholders.

Indeed, the application of the DRC Presidential Order n° 10/044 of 18th of June 2010 approving the Oil Production and Sharing Agreement between the DRC and the Company SOCO violates individual and community rights as outlined in the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights.

This ordinance also goes against other legal instruments applicable in the matter including the right for self-determination, the right to freely dispose of their natural wealth and resources, the right to a healthy environment and the right to economic, social and cultural development, given the freedom of peoples and communities, identity and common heritage. These rights must be protected by the state and respected by companies.

In addition, non-compliance with the provisions of Law 11/2002 of 29th of August 2002 on the Forest Code promulgated by President Joseph Kabila and the UNESCO Convention concerning the Protection of Cultural and Natural Heritage of 1972, and
ratified by the DRC in September 23rd, 1974, are worrying factors setting a dangerous precedent for the next generation of African leaders and the survival of key World Heritage sites on the African continent.

We are also concerned about the non-application of the principle of free, prior and informed consent during the oil exploration and / or exploitation activities in Virunga National Park project, this principle remains non-negotiable for all projects likely to affect the rights of local communities including the right to a healthy environment.

Despite various inquiries and reminders to the Congolese Government in relation to non-compliance with laws, international conventions and the rights of local communities in the oil exploration phase, the DRC government has still not ruled on the cancellation of this Ordinance.

In addition to the ecological, economic and social adverse effects, we are extremely worried about the negative impacts of this project on the stability of the Great Lakes region. Oil exploitation could trigger a whole new set of conflicts as well as cause cross-border and regional pollution of the Nile Basin. This situation is likely to endanger the peace and stability recently regained in the Democratic Republic of Congo through the involvement of the United - States together with the international community.

In conclusion, we recall that the economic and ecological values of Virunga National Park are exceptional, unique and have the real potential to contribute to sustainable development and peace in Eastern DRC.

Thus, we seek the support of your administration in order to:

- Request the President of the Democratic Republic of Congo, to cancel the above Ordinance and oil concession block V which covers 77% of the Virunga National Park.

With the hope that our letter will keep your attention, please accept, Excellency, the expression of our highest consideration.

Goma, August 1st 2014

On behalf of the Environmental Civil Society of the African Great Lakes Region

DRC Civil Society:

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1 With support from IUCN National Committee of The Netherlands, civil society organizations from Burundi, DRC, Rwanda and Uganda are working together for the empowerment of local communities in the above countries as a means to promote good governance in the management and exploitation of resources including fisheries, oil and others shared between the four countries. The project is named “Transboundary Governance African Great Lakes”.
Bantu LUKAMBO, Secrétaire General de Innovation pour le Développement et la Protection de l'Environnement (IDPE)

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Josué Mukura, Comité des Pêcheurs indépendants du Lac Édouard (COPEILE)

Jean-Marie Muanda, Secrétaire General de Action pour les Droits, l’Environnement et la Vie (ADEV)

**Uganda Civil Society**

Dickens Kamugisha, Chief Executive Officer, Africa Institute for Energy Governance (AFIEGO)

Winfred Ngabirwe, Executive Director, Global Rights Alert (GRA)

**Rwanda Civil Society**

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- Embassies of the United States Kigali, Kinshasa, Kampala and Bujumbura;
- Embassy of Belgium in Kigali, Kinshasa, Kampala and Bujumbura;
- His Excellency the President of the Democratic Republic of Congo Kinshasa / Gombe;
- His Excellency the Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo in Kinshasa / Gombe.