

14 Blei forest community suffers as global giants contend for mining rights

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Key Messages

- The Blei Community Forest, originally designated for *conservation*, has become the center of a struggle between ArcelorMittal Liberia (AML) and Solway Mining Incorporated, both seeking mining rights within the area.
- Overlapping licenses, conflicting agreements, and unclear regulatory oversight have fueled confusion and community division.
- Despite initial conservation objectives, mining interests have gradually eroded community control and forest protection efforts.
- The government's failure to ensure clear governance structures has left the Gba and Zor communities vulnerable and without sustainable forest management.

Introduction

In 2011, the Gba and Zor communities in Nimba County entered into a 15-year Community Forest Management Agreement (CFMA) with the Forestry Development Authority (FDA), granting them legal rights to own and manage 631 hectares of the Blei Forest.¹ This agreement – one of Liberia's earliest community forestry arrangements – marked an important milestone in national forest sector reform by empowering local communities to sustainably manage forest resources and share in the benefits derived from them.

USAID-funded programs between 2007 and 2017 supported the establishment of the Blei CFMA.² These programs laid the foundations for participatory forest governance, the recognition of community rights, and the development of conservation-based community forest management plans.

However, over the past decade, the Blei forest landscape has become the focus of competing mining interests, initially from ArcelorMittal Liberia (AML), later from Solway Mining Incorporated, and once again from AML following the controversial transfer of rights. These overlapping engagements, combined with weak enforcement by state institutions, have created confusion, weakened local governance structures, and diverted the forest from its original conservation purpose.

Background

In 2011, more than 20 communities submitted applications to the FDA seeking community forest status.³ The Gba and Zor application for Blei Forest was among the first ten to be approved. Importantly, its approved management category was conservation, making it one of five community forests with a strict conservation mandate.⁴

Under Liberia's community forestry framework, the governance structure comprises three tiers:

1. **Community Assembly (CA)** – the highest decision-making body on community forestry issues, representing all towns and stakeholder groups.
2. **Executive Committee (EC)** – elected by the CA to provide leadership and oversight.
3. **Community Forestry Management Body (CFMB)** – responsible for day-to-day management, negotiation of agreements, financial administration, and reporting.

Blei community forest is shared by the Gba and Zor people, and the two communities established a Joint Community Forest Management Body (JCFMB) to manage the forest collectively. These institutions are expected to function in accordance with the Community Rights Law with respect to forest lands (CRL)⁵ and its regulations, ensuring transparency, accountability, benefit sharing, and adherence to the approved forest management plan.⁶



Methodology

The investigation was undertaken by CS-IFM, consistent with the roles and responsibilities assigned to civil society under the forest legal framework⁷ and the IFM Institutional Framework⁸ and Monitoring, and Reporting Protocol. The Blei Community Forest was selected due to its conservation mandate and growing concerns over multiple mining-related activities affecting its status.

The research comprised desk-based research into the mining companies and two rounds of fieldwork in the Gba and Zor areas. The desk study was undertaken, comprising a review of historical CFMA documents, FDA records, management plans, previous IFM reports, and media articles. This was followed by an examination of mining license data from the Ministry of Mines and Energy (MME) cadaster, particularly related to AML, Solway, and Mount Bele Resources.

Following this, two field investigations were made, 27-29 August 2024 and 3-5 March 2025. During the field visit, twenty-five respondents were interviewed, including:

- All five CFMB members
- Eight Community Assembly members
- Four local leaders
- Two women leaders

- Two Community Land Development and Management Committee members
- One community advocate
- A Clan Chief (Zor Clan), a Quarter Chief (Gbarpa), and a Youth Leader (Zorgowee)

Efforts were made to contact Solway and AML in September 2024 to allow each to respond to the initial findings, but no responses were received, possibly because the matter is subject to legal proceedings. Likewise, the draft brief was delivered to the FDA in November 2025, but there has been no response to date.

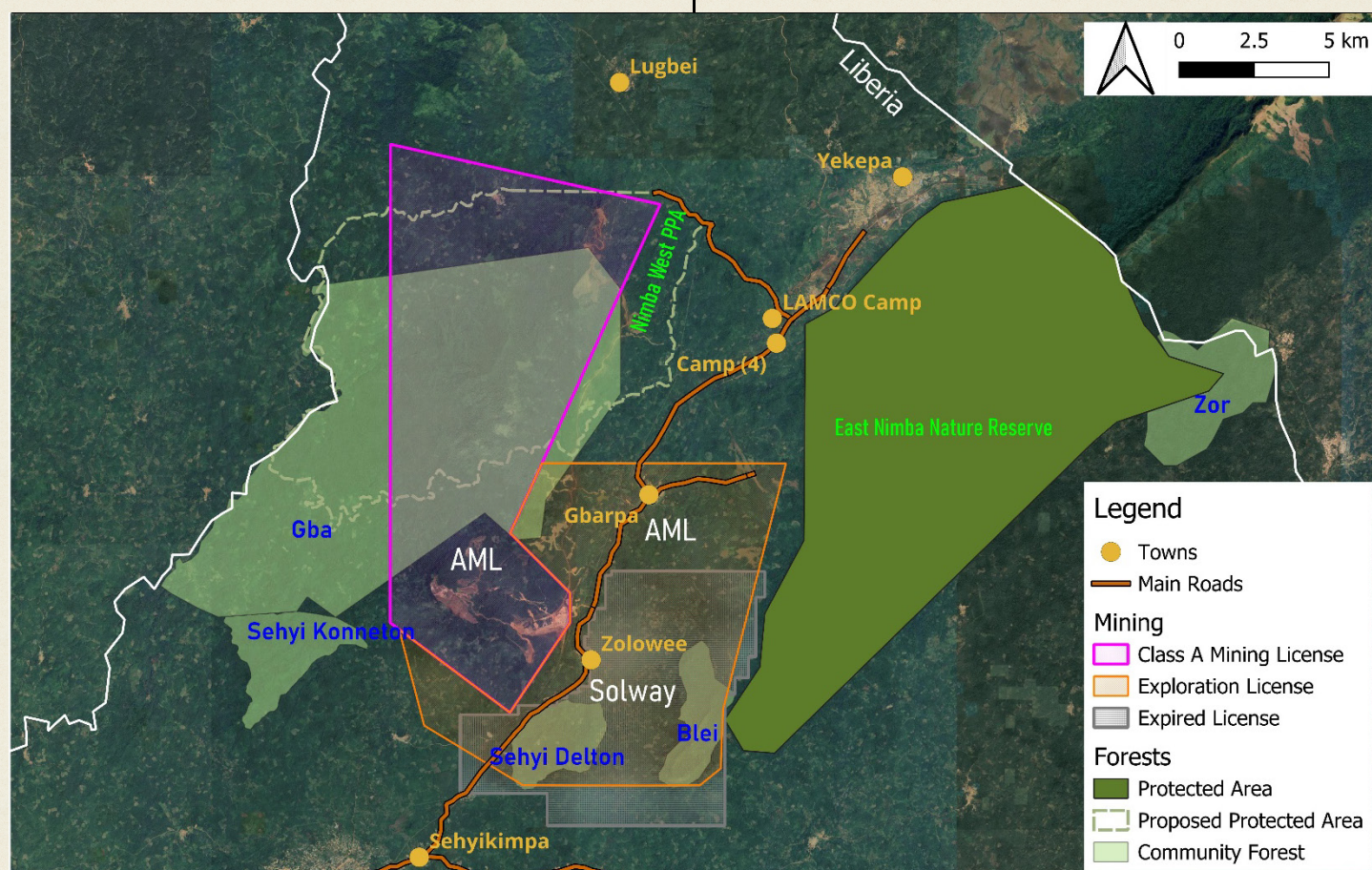
Findings

Desk study

1. The AML period, 2012–2017

Data from the Cadaster held by the MME show that AML has held a Class A (industrial) license to mine for iron ore since 2005,⁹ covering over 10,000ha in this part of Nimba County (see the pink area in the map below). A previous IFM study in 2017 indicates that in 2012, the Gba and Zor communities signed an MOU with AML.¹⁰ Under this agreement:¹¹

- AML paid stipends for community forest guards.



Protected areas, community forests, and mining licenses in the AML area, Nimba County.

- AML contributed US\$150,000 to the Gba community as compensation for the tailings pond construction that affected approximately 200 hectares of forest (almost a third of the entire community forest area).

AML's support reportedly continued until 2017, when the company reduced its engagement in response to internal corporate and political issues. During this period, AML's activities were viewed by some community members as beneficial, though they were not tied to a long-term resource management strategy.

2. Mount Bele Resources Exploration, 2011–2014

The MME Cadaster indicates that Mount Bele Resources Liberia Ltd held an exploration license for gold from December 2011 to December 2014.¹² This license area is identical to that held by Solway, as mentioned in the next paragraph, and overlaps the Blei and Delton community forests. There is insufficient information on whether this company was linked to AML, Solway, or an independent interest group. No evidence was found that the company conducted significant exploration activities, and according to news reports, its license was revoked following a legal dispute with the Government of Liberia backed by a pre-existing claim by AML.¹³

3. Solway Mining Incorporated Engagement, 2020–2023

MME data confirms Solway held an iron ore exploration license from October 2019 to October 2022, covering the entire Blei and Delton forests (see the grey area on the map above).¹⁴ MME marked the license as “cancelled”, suggesting regulatory action rather than natural expiration.

On 24 April 2020, the Gba and Zor Community Assembly and Sehyi-Kondo Authorized Community Forest (owners of Delton Forest) jointly signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)¹⁵ with Solway. This marked a significant shift from conservation to multiple-use status, enabling mining exploration activities. The MOU includes the following obligations by Solway to the Gba and Zor community:

- Allocation of the “2% of which is a constitutional provision of Article 9-c of the Explorational Law” to the community fund, for health and education.¹⁶
- Preferential employment for skilled and unskilled labor in favor of the community.
- A ‘recommendation’ that Solway support the cost of community forest guards, office maintenance, and administrative costs for the JCFMB.

- Payment for the loss of any trees and support to reforestation, including areas affected by mining exploration.
- Annual review of the “Land Rental” to adjust for any change in the area occupied by Solway. (No other reference is made to Land Rental, so it is not clear what the initial per-hectare payment was, but for logging contracts it would be US\$1.25, 55% of which is paid to the community fund.¹⁷)
- An unspecified number of drilled pumps for the provision of safe drinking water and their maintenance.

Following this, on 27 May 2020, the MME issued a letter to AML defending its decision to allocate an exploration license to Solway. This was in response to a letter from AML a week earlier claiming the allocation overlapped with AML's Class A license area.¹⁸

4. AML's re-entry into Blei and Delton: 2023–2025

Following the end of Solway's exploration license in or before October 2022, on 4 September 2023 the MME issued a license to AML to explore for iron ore in an area that encompasses Blei and Delton community forests (see the orange area on the map above).¹⁹ Unless AML seeks its renewal, it expires after three years, that is in 2026.

Before this, on 2 January 2023, AML and the Blei JCFMB signed a two-year MOU²⁰ for “Conservation for the Protection and Management of the Blei Community Forest”. Under this, the Gba and Zor communities received technical, financial, and other forms of support from AML, including:

- US\$160 each as the monthly stipend for 12 Forest Guards;
- Monthly Stipends for the JCFMB Chairman and the four other JCFMB members;
- Funds towards raingear, boots, backpacks and batteries for the Forest Guards, fuel for a generator, stationary and office running and maintenance costs;
- Support for JCFMB members to attend meetings (other than the quarterly meetings with AML);
- A payment to support boundary line clearing around the community forest;
- US\$500 as a single payment and the end of the two year period for community development projects “if Blei JCFMB achieves zero deforestation (e.g. zero chain sawing, zero hunting of protected species and zero farming) in the Blei forest, and no records of fire.”

CS-IFM has not been provided with any information clarifying the situation once this two-year MOU was due to end in January 2025.

5. Transfer Controversies and Government Involvement

In 2023, the MME instructed Solway to relinquish all assets to AML through issuing a Deed of Settlement on 29 June, a Supplementary Deed on 14 August, and a letter on 30 August.²¹ This letter is signed by the Ministers of Mines & Energy and Justice and acknowledged by both companies.

Media reports questioned such a move, however. One stated the move was despite “mining license transfer being illegal under Liberian law”, and described former President Weah as launching an investigation into the transfer after publicly criticizing his officials for allegedly misleading him. It states, “one of the most sensitive issues to be resolved is the traceability of the US\$17.5 million supposedly paid by AML to the Liberian state for the Solway license.”²²

Subsequent media reports have suggested AML agreed to pay US\$50m²³ and that Solway, disputing the transfer of its license to AML, demanded this sum to withdraw legal action.²⁴ At around the same time, demonstrations were held, aimed at preventing AML’s operations, and reportedly backed by a Solway executive.²⁵

More recently, the government of Liberia appears to have called off out-of-court negotiations unless Solway drops the legal action, which seeks US\$350m in damages.²⁶ This dispute remains unresolved at the current time,²⁷ yet it poses significant implications for community rights, benefit flows, and forest governance.

Field Findings

CS-IFM visited the Gba and Zor communities on 27-29 August 2024 and 3-5 March 2025. Regarding the support from Solway, community members reported the following promises were made, even though they are not reflected in the 2020 MOU:

- Construction of 2 rooms for the teacher’s quarters in Gbarpa;
- Establish vocational training initiative for girls (sewing class);
- Construction of a clinic in Zorgowee and a nurse’s quarters;
- Construction of an uncompleted clinic and nurses’ quarters in Zuolay;
- Construction of 2 rooms annex (class) in Zortapa.

Most of these commitments appear incomplete or partially fulfilled. For example, the teacher’s quarters were visited by the CS-IFM team and remain uncompleted. Media reports from 2022 also highlight the community’s threat to withdraw from the MOU, having recognized weaknesses in its text, making aspects of it difficult to enforce.²⁸



An incomplete teacher’s quarter constructed by Solway in Gbarpa. © CS-IFM

Similarly, the support promised by AML, according to community members, was reported as follows, and differs from the 2023 MOU:

- US\$50,000 in materials for the construction of a clinic in Gbarpa, a town some five kilometers from the Blei forest.
- Construction of an office for the JCFMB in Gbarpa
- Renovation of Gbarpa Town Hall
- Construction of a three-room annex in Zolowee, about three kilometers from the forest.
- A contribution to Zolowee of US\$28,000 annually to support operational/administrative costs of the CFMA;
- US\$740 in support to the Blei community forest;



A school building constructed by AML in Zolowee, Nimba County. © CS-IFM

Field interviews, therefore, reveal confusion and concerns that neither company has fully honored its commitments. Lying behind this is confusion among community members regarding which company, AML or Solway, holds current legitimacy.

There is also a division between the groups that benefited from Solway and those who support AML’s contributions. This has led to leadership disputes within the JCFMB and CA as different leaders are more attracted to the offers made by each company. This affects cohesion and decision-making across the forest community. There is also

dissatisfaction with the FDA's limited presence and oversight that might otherwise help the community through these complex issues that are largely the consequence of another government agency, MME.

Analysis

The governance issues unfolding in the Blei Community Forest reveal a set of deeper systemic challenges that run through Liberia's community forestry and extractive resource sectors. One of the most striking problems is the persistent lack of coordination between the FDA and the MME. While the FDA approved Blei as a conservation community forest under a CFMA, the MME later permitted mining exploration activities in the same area. These overlapping licenses and conflicting mandates, conservation on one hand, mining on the other, highlight a serious breakdown in inter-agency harmonization and have left communities caught between two competing government directives and policies.

This institutional disconnect is compounded by the vulnerability of community forests to corporate and political influence. The Gba and Zor communities, like many others across Liberia, lack the bargaining power, legal backing, and technical expertise needed to confidently negotiate with multinational mining companies. As a result, ministerial directives and political decisions have often overshadowed conservation and community rights, shifting the balance of power decisively toward external actors.

These dynamics have contributed to the erosion of the conservation mandate originally assigned to Blei. The decision to alter the forest's management plan—from strict conservation to multiple-use—created an opening for mining interests to take root. This shift was made without robust community consultation or a formal re-validation process, undermining the core intent of the CFMA and weakening both local ownership and long-term sustainability goals.

Internally, governance weaknesses further complicate the situation. Leadership disputes have fractured community unity, making collective decision-making more difficult and exposing the community to manipulation by outside actors. Poor recordkeeping and weak financial transparency have also made the forest governance system susceptible to influence, while community expectations have increasingly been shaped by short-term benefits provided by companies rather than by a focus on sustainable forest management.

All of these factors have deepened the community's dependency on corporate social contributions. While the infrastructure provided by companies—clinics, school

buildings, and water pumps—has been useful, these contributions tend to reinforce a cycle of reliance rather than strengthen self-governance or generate sustainable livelihoods. The problem is made worse when companies fail to complete promised projects, which fuels mistrust and widens the divisions already present within the community.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

Taken together, these issues lead to several important conclusions. First, the Blei Community Forest has drifted far from its original conservation purpose due to overlapping mining interests, inconsistent corporate engagements, and insufficient oversight by regulatory institutions. Second, internal governance disputes have weakened community cohesion and given external actors opportunities to exploit divisions. Finally, the legal conflict between AML and Solway poses serious risks to community rights, benefit-sharing arrangements, and the long-term sustainability of the Blei forest. The dispute between the two companies and the Government of Liberia still does not appear to have been resolved.

Recommendations

To the Government of Liberia (MOJ, MME, FDA)

1. Resolve the AML–Solway dispute transparently, ensuring that any settlement respects community rights, FPIC principles, and the conservation purpose of Blei.
2. Strengthen FDA oversight by:
 - Supporting transparent CA and JCFMB elections.
 - Enforcing CFMA regulations and record-keeping standards.
 - Reviewing and revalidating the Blei Community Forest Management Plan (CFMP) with full community participation.
3. Establish clear protocols between MME and FDA to avoid overlapping concessions and ensure that conservation CFMAs are not undermined by extractive licenses.

To AML and Solway

4. Fulfill all outstanding obligations under existing MOUs, including infrastructure completion and environmental restoration.
5. Engage communities through transparent, documented processes that respect their governance structures and decision-making procedures.

To Civil Society and IFM Monitors

6. Maintain regular monitoring, document compliance, and support community capacity-building in:
 - Negotiation skills
 - Financial management
 - Conflict resolution
 - Understanding of legal rights under the CRL
 - Access to free or affordable legal advice when required
7. Support communities to develop sustainable livelihood alternatives—including ecotourism, non-timber forest products, and conservation-linked enterprises—to reduce dependence on extractive projects.

References

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- ⁴ USAID had a longstanding policy of not supporting industrial logging through any of its donor projects.
- ⁵ GoL, 2009, An Act to establish the Community Rights Law of 2009 with respect to forest lands; www.fao.org/faolex/results/details/en/c/LEX-FAOC143892.
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- ¹¹ MoU between the Gba and Zor communities and Arcelor Mittal signed August 11, 2012.
- ¹² License number MEL 68/11, MME Mining Cadastre; <https://portal.mme.gov.lr/license/68>, accessed 15 April 2025. Exploration licenses typically expire after three years.
- ¹³ One Nimba House, 8 May 2024, Security Concerns Mount as Solway's Boima Morgan Leads Disruptions at ArcelorMittal Liberia Operational Sites in Nimba County; <https://onenimbahouse.com/security-concerns-mount-as-solways-boima-morgan-leads-disruptions-at-arcelormittal-liberia-operational-sites-in-nimba-county/>.
- ¹⁴ License number MEL8000119, MME Mining Cadastre; <https://portal.mme.gov.lr/license/396622>, accessed 15 April 2025.
- ¹⁵ MOU signed between the people of Gba-Zor-Sehyi-Kondo and Solway, 2020; <https://loggingoff.info/library/blei-mou-solway/>.
- ¹⁶ It is unclear what the MOU is referring to by "Explorational Law". It may be the exploration license, which has not been made available to the CS-IFM team.
- ¹⁷ FDA, 2007, Regulation 107-07, Regulation on certain forest fees, Section 33 states the land rental amounts;

To the Community

8. Strengthen internal governance unity by resolving leadership disputes through transparent elections and consensus-based decision-making.
9. Improve record-keeping and communication, ensuring that all agreements and financial flows are documented and reported to the broader community.
10. Participate in the CFMP development, in line with the guidance²⁹ so that the whole community plays a part in making decisions about the priority activities for sustaining the forest for future generations.

- ¹⁸ Draft letter issued to AML by the MME on 27 May, 2020, provided to CS-IFM.
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- ²⁹ ClientEarth, Heritage Partners & Associates and National Union of Community Forest Management Bodies, 2022, Community Forest Management Plan processes and template for Commercial Use Contract negotiations in community forest operations; <https://loggingoff.info/library/cfmp-processes-and-cuc-legal-guide-template/>.