U.N. warns agrofuel growth may breach human rights
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LONDON (Reuters) - Large-scale crop plantations are expanding at a rapid pace across southeast Asia, with multinational firms often benefiting the most at the expense of local communities and the environment, two U.N. rights experts warned on Wednesday.

Demand for agrofuels, such as those derived from sugar cane and palm oil, has boomed thanks in part to the United States, Europe and other rich economies seeking alternative ways to fuel their cars and homes in order to reduce their carbon emissions.

However, the United Nations' special rapporteurs on rights urged governments in countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines to be wary of land developers who promise jobs and export dollars without taking into account the food security and human rights of local populations.

"Governments must not be seduced by the promises of developers when assessing large-scale land acquisitions for export-led crops and agrofuel production," Olivier de Schutter and James Anaya said a joint statement.

For instance, they said the food security of 50,000 people could be affected by Indonesia's plans to convert rainforest and small-scale farming plots to an export-led crop and agrofuel plantation in the Meruake region.

In the Philippines, the planned expansion of a sugar cane plantation for agrofuel production in the Isabela region could have negative impacts on the municipality’s 45,000 inhabitants.

In both cases, the experts said there was an apparent lack of adequate consultation with indigenous communities and transparency during the land acquisitions.

"Governments must step up their vigilance in regard to large-scale land acquisitions to ensure that the fundamental rights of these communities are not violated, be they small-farmers, fishers, hunters, foragers or craftsmen," they said.

Without naming companies, the U.N. experts said multinational firms which export agrofuels or food crops to international markets were likely to benefit most from large-scale monocrop developments.

The conversion of forest land to intensive monocropping also has wide environmental impacts, such as the loss of forest-dwelling species in Meruake, to reduced resistance to flooding and landslides in Isabela, the experts said.

Earlier this month, a senior agriculture official in Indonesia said the southeast Asian nation aims to increase palm oil yields to boost output by 73 percent by 2020.

The Indonesia government is also reviewing the law that requires palm oil plantation firms to set aside 20 percent of land for local small-holders.

(Reporting by Jeff Coelho; editing by Keiron Henderson)