

Several fatal road crashes in Busoga Sub-region involve trucks transporting sugarcane, many of which are in poor mechanical condition.

BY ABUBAKER KIRUNDA

Sugarcane has become a major cash crop in the Busoga sub-region of eastern Uganda, gradually replacing coffee and cotton. However, various stakeholders say the crop's growing dominance is increasingly causing more harm than good.

The Busoga East Police spokesperson, Mr Michael Kasadha, said sugarcane plantations have become a security concern and are increasingly linked to deaths among residents.

Mr Kasadha explained that criminals often use the plantations as hideouts to terrorise communities.

"We have registered many cases of people being killed and their bodies dumped in sugarcane plantations by thugs hiding inside," Mr Kasadha said.

"Last week, there was an incident in Namunkeso Village in Iganga District where suspects who had reportedly stolen a motorcycle fled into a sugarcane plantation while being pursued, although locals later rounded them up," he added.

Mr Kasadha also revealed that several fatal road crashes in the region involve trucks transporting sugarcane, many of which are in poor mechanical condition.

He cited recent incidents, including the death of three people who were riding on top of a truck carrying sugarcane in Nawanyago Village on the Jinja-Kamuli Road. Mr Kasadha also referred to a case earlier this month in Ggiri Village on the Namayingo-Musita Road in Mayuge District, where five people, including four members of the same family, were run over.

In other incidents, a boda boda rider was knocked dead in Mutai in Jinja, while in Bukakande in Kamuli District a student and a rider died after their motorcycle was hit by a sugarcane truck.

He warned that many overloaded sugarcane trucks continue to frequently break down and are left parked on roads, posing a danger to motorists.

"Drivers abandon them on the road or move them at night to avoid traffic

How Sugarcane growing leaves Basoga vulnerable



Trucks carrying sugarcane in Iganga District last month. Some accidents in Busoga Sub-region have been blamed on trucks overloaded with the cane. PHOTO/TAUSI NAKATO

checks," he said.

The outgoing Luuka District LC5 chairperson, Mr Simon Wakaze, blamed the deteriorating road network in Busoga on heavy trucks transporting sugarcane.

Mr Wakaze said the trucks are often loaded on the roadsides where waste from the cane is dumped into drainage channels, blocking water flow and causing roads to be washed away.

"Sometimes when trucks get stuck in the mud, people dig up the road to free them and leave the holes open," he said.

Mr Wakaze further noted that the damage caused by the trucks frustrates efforts by district leaders to maintain roads despite limited budgets and has even cost some chairpersons, including himself, their seats.

He also linked rising poverty in Busoga to the widespread shift to sugarcane farming.

"Many residents with small pieces of land either rent them out or grow sugarcane themselves, leaving them without food at home since the crop takes a long

time to mature," he said.

"If they instead grew maize or vegetables, they would earn quicker returns than sugarcane, where, after harvest, many are left with nothing."

Mr Wakaze further revealed that poverty associated with sugarcane growing forces many parents to send their children for casual work in plantations to earn money for food.

FACTORIES IN BUSOGA

Busoga is Uganda's leading sugarcane-growing sub-region and hosts several factories that support the industry, including Kakira Sugar Works Limited, Mayuge Sugar Industries Limited, Kamuli Sugar Limited, Buyende Sugar Factory, Sugar Allied Industries Limited in Kaliro, and Bugiri Sugar Factory.

The region is also home to the newly established CN Sugar Factory in Namayingo.

He said some boys use the little money they earn from casual labour in plantations to lure young girls into relationships, contributing to rising cases of teenage pregnancies.

The Jinja District Education Officer, Mr Eria Kisambira, confirmed that sugarcane plantations are partly to blame for poor academic performance in national examinations.

"With Busoga becoming a hub for sugarcane growing, it has become a disadvantage to our learners because some parents send children to work in plantations instead of attending school," Mr Kisambira said.

He added that some pupils leave school before lunchtime to go and cut sugarcane, while during the harvest season, many skip afternoon lessons, leaving some classes half empty.

The Jinja Assistant Resident District Commissioner, Mr Samuel Kawuta, said the area is experiencing school dropout rates linked to sugarcane work.

Mr Kawuta told the *Daily Monitor* that authorities regularly conduct opera-

tions at the beginning of each term to arrest children from plantations and return them to school.

"Because children cut sugarcane and earn money, many abandon school. For the past two weeks, we have been moving around plantations, sending them back to class," he said.

Mr Kawuta, who is also a member of the District Security Committee, warned that some children accustomed to earning money during peak harvesting seasons sometimes turn to theft when there is little cane to harvest.

Climate change dilemma

The Bugweri District Natural Resources Officer, Mr Fred Wamukonyu, expressed concern that the expansion of sugarcane farming has depleted natural resources in the region.

"We have lost a significant number of swamps in Bugweri because people have planted sugarcane in them. This is very dangerous because it is exposing the area to severe effects of climate change," Mr Wamukonyu said.

He added that many trees across districts in Busoga have been cleared to create space for sugarcane cultivation.

However, the chairperson of the Kakira Sugarcane Outgrowers Association, Mr David Christopher Mombwe, downplayed claims about the negative impact of sugarcane farming.

Mr Mombwe acknowledged that some trees have been cut down to pave the way for sugarcane planting but added that farmers are being encouraged to plant tree seedlings along the edges of their plantations.

"As Kakira outgrowers, we work with an Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) that distributes tree seedlings to farmers to plant around their sugarcane plantations. So it is not entirely correct to say trees are being phased out," Mr Mombwe said.

He did not name the NGO.

He also noted that Kakira regularly provides funds to help rehabilitate roads in districts where its sugarcane outgrowers operate. Mr Mombwe faulted the police for not doing enough to remove trucks in poor mechanical condition from the roads.