

LETTER OF THE DAY

Oil companies could pollute River Nile

With an estimated length of almost 6,853km, the Nile is the longest river in the world and is subject to political interactions through 10 countries in northeastern Africa namely Rwanda, Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Sudan and Egypt with varying climates.

According to a meeting with oil companies and civil society organisations that took place at Protea Hotel in Kampala recently, the oil in Nwoya District will be transported through a pipeline that will go through River Nile before going on towards Hoima.

Whether buried under the river or suspended over it, at this point, the pipeline will be especially vulnerable to both sabotage and accidental harm. Besides, an oil spill into the Nile could have prolonged and devastating consequences. The use of oil barges also poses serious hazards.

Most of the people in Uganda as well as their livestock living along the River Nile from Jinja to Nimule depend on untreated water from the river for their drinking water. The harm will depend on the amount spilled, how long it takes to detect the spill and stop pumping, and the strength of the river current. Even a small spill could significantly affect



the local ecology of the river.

Environment Impact Assessments (EIAs) are usually carried out on projects such as the envisaged River Nile oil pipeline though by their nature, they offer no safety guarantee.

They are essentially a way to reduce the dangers and ensure that adequate procedures are put in place to mitigate damage. However, they are only governed by the regulations of the particular country where the work is to be carried out.

The criteria of an EIA done in Uganda would not be acceptable in Europe or America, where environmental legislation is at least meaningful and responsive to an informed public opinion with powers

to exercise democratic rights.

Any pipeline, no matter how well-maintained and protected, brings the risk of an oil spillage. In richer countries, the route of the pipeline would be chosen with an eye to minimising any possible environmental damage.

This is not a noticeable factor in Uganda where the new environmental legal regime, including the National Environment Bill, revised EIA regulations and new Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) regulations are yet to be put in place yet oil activities that will damage the environment are ongoing.

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