

FORENSIC LABORATORY TO COMBAT FOREST CRIMES LAUNCHED

By Julius Luwemba

The Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) launched a new forensic laboratory that will assist in combating illegal timber trade, among other forest crimes. The lab, which was commissioned last Wednesday at the Uganda Wildlife Conservation Education Centre (UWEC), marks a turning point in the fight against forest crimes in Uganda.

The facility is envisaged to uncover the truth through wildlife deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) and scientific evidence in the service of justice.

This will thereby combat the illegal wildlife trade, as well as illegal logging and timber trafficking.

COMBINED EFFORTS

The new laboratory was established through collaborative efforts from UWA and the water ministry, with support from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and funding from the European Union and technical support from the TRACE Wildlife Forensics Network, UK.



Sadek (front-left), joined by fellow dignitaries, cuts the ribbon to inaugurate the new Wildlife and Timber Laboratory at UWEC last Wednesday

EVIDENCE AGAINST OFFENDERS

On behalf of the Uganda Wildlife Authority, David Musingo, the commissioner for community conservation and Ex-situ services, said the laboratory will go a long way in supporting DNA sample preparations and court-admissible evidence against offenders.

"By analysing genetic material from plants or animals, to accurately determine their species and sometimes their

BETWEEN THE LINES

Stakeholders say illegal timber trade accelerates climate change and destroys biodiversity.

geographic origin, this lab delivers scientifically robust, court-admissible evidence," Musingo said.

Gladys Kamasanyu, the chief magistrate of the standards,

utilities and wildlife court, officiated the opening of the forensic lab. She noted that whereas the seizure of suspected illegal material is often done, the evidence remains susceptible to scientific scrutiny in order to pass the test of reasonable doubt. "With this new laboratory, science is going to tell us what they (exhibits) are, hence making the law more effective and applicable," Kamasanyu said.

CLEAR SIGNAL FOR PROSECUTION
Jan Sadek, the European Union (EU) Ambassador, who presided over the launch of the new lab, remarked that the inauguration was a clear signal to Uganda that wildlife and forest crimes are treated as serious organised crime and that they will be investigated, prosecuted and punished.

"Until today, Uganda and the wider region had no dedicated forensic capacity to identify timber species, yet deforestation and the trafficking of protected timber are recognised as specialised forms of organised crime here and worldwide," Sadek stated.

He added: "Together with other forms of wildlife crime, this illegal trade is estimated to cost up to euros 20 billion each year, globally, placing the vice among the most lucrative transnational crimes, alongside drugs, arms and human trafficking."

PROTECTING NATURAL HERITAGE

According to the EU ambassador, illegal timber trade destroys biodiversity, accelerates climate change, corruption, threatens

security and damages the cultural heritage of communities whose lives are rooted in their forests. "This laboratory is also a powerful symbol of partnership, reflecting Uganda's determination to protect its natural heritage and to confront environmental crime through strong institutions and the rule of law, as well as the commitment of the European Union and its member states in promoting sustainable development, conserving biodiversity, tackling climate change and addressing environmental threats as a priority in our co-operation," he said.

COSTING THE ECONOMY

For too long, the illegal timber trade, which accounts for an estimated 80% of the country's timber market, has cost the economy nearly sh36.5b in lost tax revenue every year, while slashing forest cover from 24% in 1990 to just 13% in 2025. Globally, wildlife and forest crime generates up to \$28b annually, rivalling the profits of drugs, arms and human trafficking.



MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND SPORTS