

Regional News

Some members have given the chairperson of the union 14 days within which to call for an AGM to discuss the deal.

BY DERICK WENANI

Sebei Elgon Cooperative Union members have disagreed over a plan to lease part of its land to an investor for 20 years. The Union owns 1,766 acres, of which 500 acres are to be leased to an investor.

Some Union members said at least 500 families could be affected if the 500 acres are handed over to the investor. Currently, the land is leased annually to local farmers at a fee of Shs300,000 per acre.

On February 14, farmers represented by delegates to the union, were called for a meeting at Kapyoyon farm in Suam Sub-county in Bukwo District over the matter. During the meeting, farmers were informed that the investor, who was also present, had already entered into a memorandum of understanding with the Union.

They were also told that meeting was called so that they witness the official handover of the land to Itracom Ltd.

Mr Jean Luc Bigirimana, the country director of Itracom Ltd, told farmers that Shs52 billion would be injected in setting up a fertiliser factory and an Irish potato demonstration farm.

"The investment is not only intended to benefit the investor or those close to me but it is set to improve the way we grow Irish potatoes and also introduce fertiliser use to the farmers," Mr Bigirimana said.

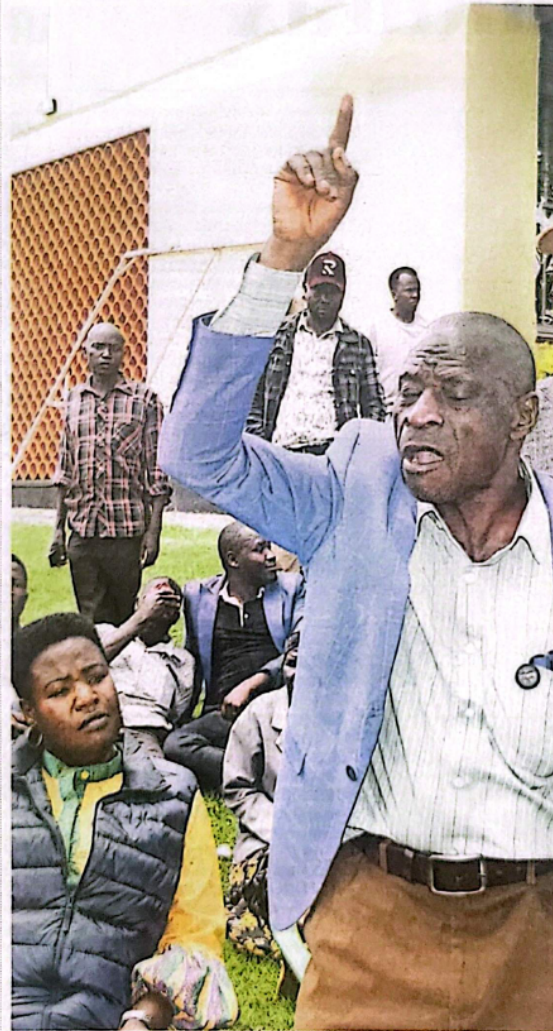
He added: "This will be a source of foreign exchange, employment, boost tourism in Bukwo, increase the tax base of the country, and improve livelihoods."

Some farmers, however, asked why the Union leaders agreed with the investor without consulting members or holding an annual general meeting, where such crucial matters are discussed.

As a result, Union members left the meeting prematurely, amid demands for a special general meeting.

On March 10, the delegates who had agreed to meet at the Union's headquarters in Kapchorwa Municipality were blocked by security personnel. They instead held the meeting outside the Kapchorwa resident district commissioner (RDC)'s office. They were delegates from over 72 societies that subscribe to the Union.

Sebei farmers protest Kapyoyon land deal



A delegate expresses his concerns about Sebei Elgon Cooperative Union leaders leasing part of the union's land to an investor during a meeting in Kapchorwa District last Tuesday. PHOTO/DERICK WENANI

UNION LEADER SPEAKS OUT

Mr Nelson Kusuro, the acting chairman of the union said leaders would address the members' concerns as soon as possible.

"We have taken in the request by delegates for a general meeting, we are working on that and finalising on beating their Ultimatum and from now, within 2-3 days, we would have finished all the arrangements like informing the commissioner for cooperatives and the delegates will be addressed," he told this publication yesterday, adding that they did everything within the law and are not mandated to brief the delegates of the business transactions.

"We can do it but the law doesn't compel us to inform the delegates, the board is empowered by article 20 of the cooperatives act and it is very clear, we met all the obligations, informed the commissioner for cooperatives who gave a letter of no objection to continue with the business transaction, we can only inform the delegates if we want to sell the property and not hiring it," Mr Kusuro said.

Mr Burhan Siwa, the chairperson and delegate for Kapteret Farmers' Transport Cooperative Society for the last 15 years, accused the board of the Union of acting illegally.

"Some of us would have welcomed the investor if the board members had followed the right procedure. The problem is that when they identified the investor, they took it upon themselves and even went ahead to sign an MOU without consulting the owners," he said.

Mr Siwa said in the previous AGM they had allowed the board to transact business not exceeding Shs300 million.

"...but now they have entered an MOU with an investor who is telling us that they are going to invest up to Shs52 billion," he said.

Mr Siwa stressed that the land in question belongs to locals of Sebei Sub-region, which consists of three districts (Bukwo, Kapchorwa and Kween).

Mr Dismas Cherop, a delegate for Chepkwasta Growers' Society, said the farmers doubt the authenticity of the deal.

"The investor has not even done community mobilisation and when we learnt that the investor has got access to our land, we called the board of directors but they could not listen to us," he said.

Mr Soyekwo Shirini Mangut, who has been a delegate for Sipi Growers' Cooperative Society to the Union for 30 years, said the government should intervene, saying they are being intimidated to hand over land by force.

Mr Lamin Kassim, a delegate for Berriny Primary Cooperative Society, said they have given the chairperson of the Union an ultimatum of 14 days to call for an AGM.

"Failure to do so, we will be forced to call for a special general meeting because the law allows us, as cooperators, upon notification to the leadership," he said.

In the March 10 meeting, the delegates also formed a nine-member ad-hoc committee with three members from each district of Sebei to oversee the affairs of the Union until the special general meeting was held.

However, the Union's acting chairperson, Mr Isaac Nelson Kusuro, told attendees of the March 10 meeting: "This meeting is illegal, and I request that I leave so that you cannot say I was part of this."

But he promised delegates that a general meeting would be held, during which details on the transaction between the Union and the investor would be released.

Ms Evelyn Chemutai, the Bukwo District Woman Member of Parliament, also attended the March 10 meeting and faulted the Union leadership for sidelining the delegates.

She also condemned security personnel for stopping the meeting at the union headquarters, pushing members to hold a meeting under the tree.

Col Juma Seiko, also a delegate and former chairperson of the Union, however, told delegates on March 10 that the title of the land in question is at the Uganda Land Commission pending payment for the transfer to a freehold title.

"From 2016, the Union leaders have been collecting the money and never took the money to Uganda Land Commission to get the title, now 10 years down the road," he said.