

PHOTO BY PETER ABAANABASAZI



A resident pointing at the abandoned gold exploration site which is now covered by water in Buhimba sub-county, Kikuube district. Seven people have so far died at this site. Inset is Garuhanga

KIKUUBE ABANDONED GOLD SITE TURNS INTO DEATH TRAP

By Peter Abaanabasazi

Residents of Buhimba sub-county in Kikuube district are demanding urgent government intervention after an abandoned gold exploration site turned into what they describe as a dangerous death trap.

When Mechanised AGRO (U) Limited began alluvial gold exploration and bulk sampling in the area in 2020, local residents and leaders welcomed the project with excitement. However, what began as a source of hope has since turned into a tragedy for the surrounding communities.

THE LANDOWNER EXPLAINS

The project started after businessman Joseph Garuhanga rented 10 acres of land to Mechanised AGRO (U) Limited. "They approached me in 2019 and said they wanted to use my land, so I should rent them my land for two years at an agreed amount. By that time, I didn't know what they wanted to use the land for, but I accepted and hired them 10 acres out of my 150 hectares of land. Eventually, they came with heavy machinery and excavated a tailing pond sited on one and a half acres of land, saying they will be covering it upon doing the assessment of amount of gold in that area," Garuhanga said.

Garuhanga noted that the company operated in the area for only six months and left the site with an open pond filled with water.

Following several deaths at the abandoned gold site, police arrested the landowner (Garuhanga) who was later released on police bond pleading that he was not responsible for managing the abandoned site.

NEMA APPROVAL

Documents seen by *New Vision* indicate that Mechanised AGRO (U) Limited began operations after receiving a certificate of Environmental and Social Impact Assessment approval from the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA).

According to the document, certificate number NEMA ESIA 13264 was issued on March 17, 2020 and was valid for two years. The project was valued at sh4b.

Under the approval conditions, the company was required to ensure community health and safety by restricting access to the site, fencing off open mine pits and erecting safety warning signposts.

"Ensure that during restoration and backfilling of the created pit, the wetland is levelled and landscaped to its initial gradient to support initial flow rate of the water course before disturbance," the certificate reads.

Efforts to reach Mechanised AGRO (U) Limited for comment regarding allegations of having left the site with an open pond were unsuccessful, as the location of the company's offices and phone contacts could not be easily traced.