GOLD AT A PAINFUL PRICE

BUSHENYI

By Bruno Mugizi

What was once the quiet rhythm of tea pluckers working across the rolling hills of Igara West has been replaced by a dangerous underground rush for gold.

On February 24, 2026, tragedy struck when a gold mine collapsed at Kayanga in Kyamuhunga sub-county, Bushenyi district, burying five people alive. The accident exposed the growing risks of informal artisanal mining that has quietly spread across the area over the past three years.

Across Kyamuhunga sub-county, Bitooma town council and neighbouring villages, the hills that once symbolised the prosperity of tea farming now conceal makeshift mining shafts dug into fragile soils.

Young men, middle-aged workers and increasingly women descend daily into narrow pits without helmets, protective boots or structural support.

Driven by unemployment and declining tea incomes, artisanal mining has become a lifeline for many households. However, it is a livelihood built on dangerous ground.

Most of the pits are dug several metres deep without reinforcement. During the rainy season, the loose soils become unstable, increasing the risk of deadly landslides.

GOVT HALTS OPERATIONS

Following the collapse, authorities halted mining activities at the site as investigations began.

Bushenyi district Police commander Felix Mugizi confirmed the suspension.

"No one is allowed to continue mining in that area, until investigations are complete. Anyone found operating illegally will face the law," he warned.

Deputy resident district commissioner (RDC) Donanto Kasigazi said the Government would conduct environmental and safety assessments to determine the cause of the collapse.

Bushenyi LC5 chairperson Jafari Basajjabalaba described the incident as unfortunate and called for urgent reforms in the sector.

Basajjabalaba added that the district would work with relevant government agencies to strengthen monitoring and enforcement of mining safety standards.

CIVIL SOCIETY RAISES CONCERN

Civil society organisations say the tragedy exposes gaps in government oversight of local mining activities.

Kakonge Apollo, the chief executive officer of the Western Ankole Civil Society Forum (WACSOF), said: "It was unfortunate that lives were lost as a result of unregulated local mining activities. There is laxity on the part of government in ensuring compliance with even the most basic rules," he said.

"Mining is inherently risky, and wherever it is happening, authorities must monitor activities closely to prevent loss of life and environmental harm."

Kakonge also questioned whether anyone would take responsibility for the negligence that led to the deaths.

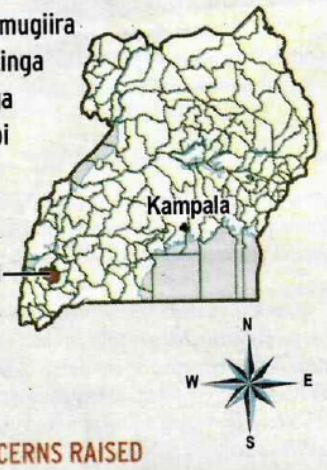
GRAPHIC BY BRIAN SSEKAMATTE

Gold beneath, grief above

FEBRUARY 24, 2026
Five miners buried alive in Kayanga gold mine collapse

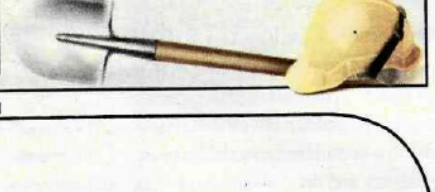


IGARA WEST RICH GOLD DEPOSITS
- Kyanyamugiira
- Nyakazinga
- Kayanga
- Mirambi



THE RISKS
Artisanal miners work in dangerous conditions
- No helmets or protective gear
- No structural support in pits
- Shafts dug several metres deep
- Increased collapse risk during rainy season

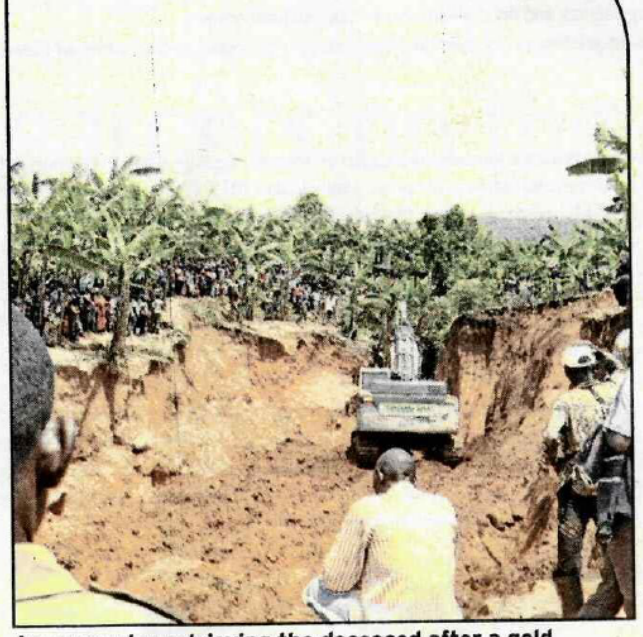
CONCERNS RAISED
- Lack of monitoring of mining sites
- Dangerous open pits left by investors
- Poor enforcement of mining rules



BETWEEN THE LINES

Beyond the statistics, the tragedy left families devastated. For the family of 32-year-old Sansio Twijukye, the mine collapse wiped out not only a life, but also the future of a household that depended on him.

PHOTO BY BRUNO MUGIZI



An excavator retrieving the deceased after a gold mine collapsed in Kayanga, Kyamuhunga sub-county, Bushenyi district on Tuesday last week

POVERTY PUSHING YOUTH

Residents say the mining boom is largely driven by economic hardship.

In Mashonga ward, Sula Nuwe said many young people had few opportunities even before gold was discovered in the area. "Many young people previously earned a living by plucking tea, but following the decline in tea prices, they have turned to illegal mining in search of alternative income opportunities," he said.

He believes government intervention should go beyond banning mining activities.

"Government should not only stop people from mining, but also support them with safer methods and proper equipment," Nuwe said.

Lauben Gumisiriza, a resident of Kayanga cell, said many families now depend entirely on gold mining for survival.

HARDSHIP ABOVE

Igara West is believed to have rich gold deposits, particularly in Kyanyamugiira, Nyakazinga, Kayanga and Mirambi villages.

However, many residents say the mineral wealth beneath their soil has not translated into improved livelihoods.

"There is gold here, but nothing has changed in our lives," one miner, who preferred anonymity, said. Adrine Ainomugisha, a resident of Mirambi, said some investors have left behind dangerous open pits. "Children have fallen into some of them," she said.

Adolf Kanyomozi, the LC3 chairperson of Kyamuhunga sub-county, said weak regulation has created loopholes in the sector.

Beatrice Birungi, the LC3 vice-chairperson of Kyamuhunga sub-county, described the collapse as a wake-up call.

"Lives are being lost because of poverty and weak regulation. We need a lasting solution, not temporary closures," she said.

FAMILIES SHATTERED

Beyond the statistics, the tragedy left families devastated. For the family of 32-year-old Sansio Twijukye, the mine collapse wiped out not only a life, but also the future of a household that depended on him.

Esther Aikirize said her brother had assumed the role of family head after their father passed away years ago.

CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND

The collapse also claimed the life of 16-year-old Stuart Kokyenga Akanyamba, who had become the main provider for his siblings after their father's death.

His mother, Evalyne Kyomuhendo, described him as the pillar of the family.

"He was paying school fees for his siblings. He was the breadwinner of my family," she said.

Kyomuhendo said she received the news of the accident at around 2:00pm and rushed to the scene in disbelief.

To compound the grief, sh700,000 that Akanyamba had saved was reportedly stolen during the funeral.

"He had planned to save sh2m so as to educate his sister and enrol for a driving course. All his plans have perished," she said.

Medline Ahumuza, 24, the widow of the late Julius Mujurizi, said her husband left behind an 11-month-old baby after only 22 months of marriage.

"When I heard he was trapped, I felt as if I had been struck by lightning," she said.

CASE FOR ORGANISED MIN

Geoffrey Kamese, the executive director of Bio Vision Africa, believes organising miners into groups could help address some of the safety and regulatory challenges.

Kamese, an environmentalist and human rights activist with more than 25 years of experience in Uganda's environmental sector, said organised miners are easier for government to regulate.

Working in groups would also make it easier for miners to mobilise resources to acquire proper equipment and adopt safer mining techniques.

According to Kamese, organised miners are more likely to obtain mining licences which contain regulations aimed at promoting sustainable mining practices.

"The saying that information is power comes alive in the mining sector. It is important to raise awareness about mining requirements. Communities often do not know what to do or how to do it. But they can perform better when they are empowered with the right information," he said.

He added that some miners who were exposed to safe practices during visits to Tanzania have started building embankments to reinforce pit walls and improve safety.

Kamese noted that while small-scale mining plays an important role in providing employment and supporting livelihoods, safety and environmental protection must remain priorities.

"Small-scale mining contributes to employment and the economy, but it is even more important to promote sustainable mining that protects both people and the environment," he said.

Additional reporting by Gerald Tenywa