

Probe unearths forest encroachers

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KAMPALA. The commission of inquiry into land matters has started investigating fraudulent issuance of land titles in central forest reserves in Mukono and Buikwe districts.

It is alleged that several people in collusion with the district officials and registrar of titles acquired land titles while others encroached on the government forests through cultivation.

The commission assistant lead lawyer, Mr John Bosco Suuza, said a total of 30 land titles were issued in Zirimiti Central Forest reserve in Ssayi Village in Mukono.

Appearing before the commission, Mr Robert Mubokisa, the sector manager of the law enforcement unit at the National Forestry Authority (NFA), testified that the land titles were issued on a section of Zirimiti between 2013 and 2015.

"The information I have from the communities is that the origin of these land titles started with Mukono Local Government where some documents originated in regard to boundary opening of what they described as public

land," Mr Mubokisa said.

He admitted that although they have maps, the boundaries are not clearly marked, posing a challenge.

He said purported landlords, upon acquiring land titles, intended to sell the blocks acquired to other people who in turn reported to his office.

Portion

Asked about the extent of encroachment, Mr Mubokisa said: "It is a very big area which is encroached on and only a small portion remains forested. Almost three quarters of Zirimiti forest reserve has been encroached upon as early as 1990s."

He said there is a group working through a network that is claiming about 300 square miles in Nakalanga

forest and has always been sending people to the reserve on public holidays, weekends and late in the night to evade arrest.

Mr Mubokisa also named army veterans claiming for ownership of land at Ssayi and Nakalanga forest.

The NFA official said they have been using threatening measures to utilise the forest land.

"With this encroachment, the local communities feel deprived. They question how Buganda administrators and veterans acquire and use forest land thereby increasing encroachment. Those external forces have exerted a lot of pressure on the forest leading to total degradation of the forest contrary to the objective of sustainable management," Mr Mubokisa said.

MORE ENCROACHMENT

Other forests under encroachment, according to Mr Robert Mubokisa are Mola and Koko forest in Buikwe, which have since been surveyed by unknown people but no proper information from Police on how the case

was handled. Mr Mubokisa said another group of people claiming to come from Namasole (mother of reigning Kabaka of Buganda) is degrading forests and claiming 83 hectares from Koko Forest.