

Regional News

Illegal fishing has resurfaced on Lake Victoria, a few months after the Fisheries Protection Unit's operations was put on hold.

BY DENIS EDEMA

Local fishing communities in Sector One, covering the districts of Mayuge, Jinja, Buvuma, Buyende, and Buikwe, have expressed concern over the resurgence of illegal fishing, warning that the practice is threatening aquatic life and undermining their livelihoods.

Through their leaders, the fishers say destructive methods have resurfaced in recent months, affecting immature fish and disrupting breeding cycles.

They link the trend to the suspension of operations of the Fisheries Protection Unit (FPU) in December 2025, following numerous complaints by fishers against the unit commanded by Lt Col Mercy Tukahirwa.

However, the fishers said Lt Col Tukahirwa's two-year leadership was characterised by a campaign season that placed her in a very careful decision-making position alongside army officers under her when conducting their operations.

Mr Daniel Mukisa, a fisherman from Njeru Municipality, praised Lt Col Tukahirwa for her integrity while serving with the FPU at various landing sites.

"It was unfortunate that her tenure coincided with the election period," Mr Mukisa said. "Some politicians in the fishing sector accused the FPU of torturing fishers caught using illegal gear, overshadowing the unit's efforts to maintain order."

He emphasised that despite the political pressures, Lt Col Tukahirwa carried out her duties professionally and fairly.

The communities are now urging the government to expedite the operationalisation of the newly established 155 Marine Battalion, created by President Museveni, and the formal appointment of Maj Joseph Sebukeera as its commander.

New leadership

Under the new arrangement, the Deputy Chief of Defence Forces of the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF), Lt Gen Sam Okiding, will work with other security agencies and civilian fishing

Fishers want army back as illegal fishing returns



Authorities prepare to destroy some of the illegal fishing gear used to catch immature fish, now sold on the black market. PHOTO/DENIS EDEMA

leaders to establish leadership committees at various landing sites.

These committees will collaborate with the 155 Marine Battalion to enforce fisheries laws, promote sustainable fishing practices, and ensure the use of recommended gear.

An anonymous UPDF officer said the formation of the 155 Marine Battalion's leadership, including civilian representatives, is underway and will soon be operational.

"We have noticed the excitement of fishermen from the time the President issued the directives of the changes. They are making small boats to fish using illegal fishing gear but we cannot do anything until the new leadership is formed with its conditions," the officer said.

Mr Musa Dhikusooka, an administrator and fisherman at Namugongo Landing Site in Mayuge District, expressed concern over the resurgence of illegal fishing following the three-

FPU BACKGROUND

Four leadership transitions have taken place in the Fisheries Police Unit (FPU). Lt Col James Nuwagaba served as the first commander from 2017 to 2020. He was succeeded by Lt Col Dick Kaija, who was later demoted. Following public complaints about alleged human rights abuses during operations aimed at curbing illegal fishing, the President appointed Lt Col Mercy Tukahirwa as the new FPU commander. With her leadership, the government has now established a 155-member marine battalion to strengthen maritime security. The Fisheries Bill, passed in 2023, seeks to reintroduce traditional fishing methods from the 1950s, amended in 2021.

month absence of army patrols since December 2025.

Unfading hope

He said the enforcement gap has allowed culprits who use banned fishing gear to return to the waters, threatening fish stocks and local livelihoods.

"Mr Dhikusooka emphasised that the fishing community is ready to cooperate with the new leadership teams being established by the 155 Marine Battalion's formulation committee."

He said these structures will enable fishers to monitor each other and ensure adherence to sustainable fishing practices. He expressed optimism that the 155 Marine Unit will not only curb illegal fishing but also provide adequate security for fishers' property, protecting them from intrusions by counterparts from Kenya, Tanzania, and the DRC.

"With the arrival of new leadership, the personnel number should be in-

creased to operate in day and night shifts," Mr Dhikusooka said. "They must be equipped and positioned to prevent illegal entry of fishing gear, including those imported from China, through porous borders."

Mr Najibu Matende, a fisherman operating in both Jinja and Mayuge districts, blamed politicians for the current challenges facing Uganda's waterbodies, saying they have confused fishers without offering lasting solutions.

He noted that since 2017, no Member of Parliament has advocated for the provision of recommended fishing gear at affordable prices for local fishers.

"The government needs to prioritise the needs of small-scale fishing communities to ensure both sustainable fishing practices and the protection of aquatic resources. For example, they should address how to make fishing gear accessible and affordable for small-scale fishers, instead of focusing only on the big commercial operators," Mr Najibu said. "The recommended fishing gear is very expensive, which forces some fishers to turn to illegal equipment available on the black market."

He emphasised that without practical support from authorities, efforts to curb illegal fishing will remain limited, as many local fishers are left with little choice but to use banned methods to sustain their livelihoods.

Mr Eric Wasajja, another of the fishers' chairperson in Kalangala, expressed optimism about the changes expected under the new leadership, noting that greater civilian involvement will bring innovative approaches to managing the waters.

Mr Sadam Olwita, the Chairperson of the Association of Fishers and Lake Users of Uganda (Eastern Region) has welcomed President Museveni's decision to make changes in the fisheries enforcement structure, saying the move comes with both positive outcomes and challenges.

Although the FPU is still operating in the waters, incidents of brutality have reportedly decreased.