

Many people have been displaced and properties destroyed.

BY FELIX WAROM OKELLO

For generations, rivers Nile, Ora, and Enyau have been the lifeline of the West Nile Sub-region.

However, over the years, after downpours, the rivers have burst their banks, and swallowed gardens and homes, resulting in displacement, injuries and sometimes death.

Many never saw the floods in the West Nile sub-region as an effect of climate change.

With the first season rains here, there is a growing worry. The rains are violent with strong winds, sometimes last for more than three hours. This sends a warning to those living on the rivers banks and in lowlands about impending floods.

At the shores of Albert Nile in Pakwach District, Ms Gladys Acirocan, said: "It is not just the rain. It is that we have tampered with the environment. That is by building close to the rivers, cultivating near or filling the river pathways," she said.

As such, people have suffered the unprecedented effects.

"We have depended on the river for decades as a source of income through fishing plus water for irrigation and home consumption. We need to get prepared as the rains have started," she said.

Mr Kizito Wacibra, 60, a resident of Wadelai Sub-county in Pakwach District, said: "The floods have become common and little is being done to control them. We lose animals, crops and household property every year to floods."

He added: "Yet there is no place for the people to relocate because most of them have their ancestral land here. They are only accommodated for a short time in schools. The district disaster management committee should find solutions to these floods."

Wadelai Sub-county is on low-lying ground where the tributaries of River Ora passes and joins River Nile. Every rainy season, it experiences floods with devastating effects. Dei and Panyimur sub-counties are also flood-prone.

In Obongi District, about 10 years ago, the former Obongi County MP, Mr Hassan Kaps Fungaroo, led a mobilisation of communities to clear the reeds and papyrus that were blocking the water

Floods leave West Nile residents in misery



Locals travel by canoe in a flooded area in Obongi District. PHOTO/FELIX WAROM OKELLO

ways. This helped to mitigate floods for about six years, especially in Itula and Palorinya sub-counties.

However, between 2019 and 2021, the district experienced the worst floods ever where over 1,000 people were displaced. Several homes were submerged and ferry operations were halted for two years until it was relocated to a temporary landing site.

As a result, in 2023, the Obongi District Environment Officer, Mr Henry Uzima, said they had demarcated wetlands and warned people not to settle in those flood-prone areas to avoid catastrophes.

On March 31, Pakwach District council resolved to relocate Pakwach Health Center IV at Lubiri B Village, Pakwach Town Council because of the swelling water from the Nile that affects the health centre.

The Pakwach District Chairperson, Mr Robert Steen Omuto, said: "The relocation will also fast-track the process of establishing a district hospital."

Following an earlier forecast, meteorologists and officials from the Ministry of Water and Environment warned

PAST FLOOD INCIDENTS

• On August 25, 2022, over 500 acres of crops were washed away by floods. It also displaced 1,200 residents after River Tete broke its banks in Adjumani District.

• In 2020, most parts of the region along rivers were flooded after to heavy rains. The rising water levels in River Nile attributed to heavy rains resulted in floods in part of Moyo, Adjumani, and Obongi district in the Nile corridor. A total of 20,000 people were displaced.

that there would be above-average rains for the March-May (MAM) 2026 season, marking the first major rainy season with high risks of floods, landslides, and diseases. Experts have also identified West Nile, along with Lango, Rwenzori, and Bugisu, as sub-regions where downpours will occur within this period.

"Often, floods are nature's response to abuse. Apart from OPM (Office of the Prime Minister), Uganda lacks standalone institutions that deal specifically with disasters. Even the meteorological department doesn't give details on how to mitigate floods."

Mr Amanzuru added: "Wetlands and trees are a direct control path in mitigating floods. However, people have destroyed nature, by settling in wetlands because they have the money to construct. We need to obey the law."

Other experts said techniques like the construction of levees, dikes, dams, reservoirs or retention ponds to hold extra water during times of flooding are necessary.

The Obongi farmers agreed, though reluctantly at first, to leave a buffer zone along the riverbanks. Instead of crops, they planted grasses and reeds that could absorb excess water and slow down the flow.

Meanwhile, the village women stopped doing business at the River Nile banks, relocating the market to the upper side. They then cleared drainage channels, removed plastic waste, and even started a small recycling initiative. Today they have monthly clean-up days of the banks.

With guidance from the district technical team, in Obongi town, families began building their homes above ground level, using stronger foundations and elevated storage areas. While it didn't stop the floods, it reduced the damage.

The locals add that there is a need to improve drainage and infrastructure by removing blockages caused by garbage and silt, build culverts and small bridges that allow water to pass freely. They also propose the enforcement of proper land-use planning, map flood-prone areas and restrict construction there.

Mr Louis Dradria, who lives along Enyau River, which has routinely witnessed floods in Arua City, said there is a need to prevent illegal settlements in drainage corridors and guide urban expansion toward safer, higher ground.

"Poor waste disposal is a major cause of urban flooding. Authorities should provide regular garbage collection services and enforce laws against dumping waste in drainage channels," he said.

On March 25, floods also caused havoc in Koboko Municipality, with about 500 people displaced.

The Nebbi District Secretary for Finance, Planning and Administration, Mr Lawrence Kissa, said: "In the 2025/06 budget, we approved Shs1b for climate change, land and water management. For the 2026/27 financial year, we allocated Shs1.19b under natural resources."

As part of the mitigating measures, Mr Kissa, added: "We intend to restore 10km of Alala River catchment, restore 10 hectares of degraded wetlands, promote environmental and hygiene awareness at the district headquarter, monitoring, inspections, reviews/enforcements and community engagement activities."

How to control floods

Environmental experts such as Mr William Amanzuru say that methods like planting vegetation to retain extra water, terracing hillsides to slow flow of rainwater downhill and construction of floodways (man-made channels to divert floodwater) are necessary.