



Encroached. Some of the submerged houses that were constructed near Lubigi wetland in Kampala. Many people have continued to encroach on the wetland despite President Museveni's directive against the vice. FILE PHOTO

Wakiso leaders defy Museveni on wetlands

Argument. Leaders argue that the affected people needed more time to relocate to other areas.

BY JAMES KABENGWA
editorial@ug.nationmedia.com

WAKISO. Wakiso District leaders have defied President Museveni's directive to evict wetland encroachers.

Mr Museveni has previously issued numerous pronouncements against encroachment on wetlands and forest reserves across the country, the recent one being in July on his tour to Bushenyi Wet Coffee Processors in Sheema District.

By destroying wetlands, Mr Museveni argues, the country risks losing its water catchment resources and exposes the country to adverse effects

of climate change.

However, leaders in Wakiso claim that although the presidential directive still stands, the affected people needed to be given more time to relocate to other areas.

"We postponed the planned evictions due to some constraints, but we will evict them when the right time comes," Mr Gerald Lumbuye, the Makindye/Ssabagabo mayor, said during an interview on Wednesday.

Leaders in the district had set July 31 as deadline for evicting all wetland encroachers in the area, which has since expired.

Mr Lumbuye explained that they are still discussing with Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) to reinforce their team to carry out the evictions.

"Of course we are still a young Municipality (Makindye/Ssabagabo) and

we cannot carry out an operation of such a magnitude without enough manpower. So, that is why we want KCCA to support us," he added.

The delay to enforce the presidential directive has instead given lee-way to new encroachers, who have since replaced the papyrus with gardens of yams, potatoes, maize and beans plus bricklaying.

The Wakiso District chairperson, Mr Matia Lwanga Bwanika, said his team is committed to restoring wetlands in the area, but they have been let down by the National Environment Management Authority (Nema).

"Wetlands are being destroyed by the powerful individuals in government and when Nema team comes to evict them, they run after bigwigs and harass the peasants. At the end of the day, the public looks at us as people who don't know what we are doing," Mr Bwanika said in a telephone interview.

The Lubaga North MP, Mr Moses Kasibante, whose constituency shares part of Lubigi wetland, said the President lacks the political will to protect the environment.

But Don Wanyama, the senior presidential press secretary, said when the President issues directives, it is the role of implementing agencies in this case Nema to enforce them.

In March 2016, Nema enforcement team together with environment police destroyed crops planted by encroachers in Lubigi, but the exercise stopped abruptly.

Ms Naomi Karekaho, the Nema spokesperson, said they have already come up with an inventory of thousands of titles in wetlands and sent the list to Parliament.

"We have sent the inventory to the technical committee on Land and Environment. We also sent the same to Cabinet and I am sure they will soon make a final decision on the matter," she said.

Three years ago, government announced plans to cancel at least 17,000 land titles registered under wetlands in Kampala, Wakiso and Mukono districts claiming that the title deeds were issued in error.

Protection of wetlands

Section 36 of the National Environment Act provides for protection of wetlands and prohibits any person from reclaiming, erecting or demolishing any structure that is fixed in, on, under or over any wetland.

Wakiso District covers an area of approximately 2,400 square kilometres of which 384 are wetlands. The wetland cover lost in the district per annum currently stands at 30 per cent.