

# District, NFA clash over evictions



Destroyed. Prisoners cut down a banana plantation on the shores of Lake Kacheera last year. PHOTO BY IVAN KIMBOWA

**Issue.** Whereas NFA officials say their aim is to restore the depleted forest reserve, district leaders insist that it is an illegal move because there has never been a forest in the contested area.

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**RAKAI.** A row is brewing between leaders in Rakai District and National Forestry Authority (NFA) officials over the latter's move to evict residents on Lake Kijjanebalora catchment area.

According to NFA officials, more than 20,000 residents in the sub-counties of Kagamba, Kyalulangira, Kacheera and Kiziba are occupying the area illegally and must vacate to allow the forestry body to recover forest reserves in the area.

Mr Denis Ssebugwawo, the NFA manager in-charge of Sango Bay Range, says the move is part

of their wider plan to restore all depleted forest reserves across the country.

"After the boundary opening and reconnaissance, we have planned a series of stakeholder engagements to prepare the affected encroachers for the eventual evacuation from these protected areas," he says.

Mr Ssebugwawo adds that they will be looking at the size of the land each resident owns, number of households in the area, when they occupied the land, government installations including schools and health units, among others.

He further notes that the National Forestry and Tree Planting Act, 2003 only grants permission to communities to do forest-based activities such as bee keeping, tree planting and eco-tourism upon approval from the Authority.

The forest reserves NFA seeks to recover measure between 5,000 and 8,000 hectares.

"We are not targeting those people as individuals but this is a nationwide campaign to allow all our forests regenerate naturally and save the country from future

## NFA RESPONDS

While meeting local leaders and other stake holders at Rakai District headquarters last Monday, Mr Steven Galima, the coordinator of natural forests management, who represented the NFA executive director, Mr Michael Mugisa, told local leaders that they are pushing for evictions to save Lake Kijjanebalora whose water levels have started declining.

Mr Galima said the forest reserves legally exist, insisting that residents encroached on them during former president Idi Amin time.

"None of the occupants was given a permit neither a license. Even if they had them, we would only allow them to do other activities, but not setting up permanent houses," he said.

negative impacts of climate change," Ssebugwawo says.

However, politicians in the district protest the move, saying the evictions will render residents homeless yet they have stayed on the land for more than 50 years.

Mr Amos Mandela, the Buyamba County MP, castigates NFA, saying they lack proper knowledge of their boundaries,

insisting that the disputed land never had forests before.

"What makes a forest are the trees, but they have never existed in all those areas they claim to protect. If NFA wants to promote afforestation, let them sensitise residents and give them tree seedlings to plant rather than threatening them with eviction," he says, wondering how government could set up infrastructure such as roads, schools and health centres in gazetted forest reserves if such areas are not for human settlement.

Mr Mandela cites Buyamba Sub-county which he says has seven and 12 government and private schools respectively, 17 churches, three public and nine health facilities.

"Does NFA want to tell us that those facilities were put in place for snakes and animals to enjoy? he asks.

Ms Juliet Ssuubi Kinyamatama, the Rakai Woman MP, advises NFA to reconsider their decision and look for idle land within the said reserves where they can plant trees instead of inconveniencing locals.

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## Police officers acquitted

**MUBENDE.** The State has withdrawn charges against police officers who were accused of assault and robbery. In a statement read before journalists on Saturday, the Wamala regional police spokesperson, Mr Norbert Ochom, said the Resident State Attorney's office in Mubende District had dropped the case, saying the evidence adduced against the suspects was not sufficient enough to implicate them. The suspects were facing charges of robbing more than Shs30m and assault, which offences they allegedly committed in March this year. [Jessica Nabukenya]

## PWDs demand own ministry

**MASAKA.** Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) have asked President Museveni to give them an independent ministry to handle their affairs. Speaking at a meeting organised by PWDs Members of Parliament at Kijjabweiri Rehabilitation Centre in Masaka last weekend, they said many issues affecting them have not been addressed by the line Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development. Both Mr Alex Ndeezi, the MP for PWDs in central region and Safia Nalule Jjuuko, who is the PWDs Woman MP, promised to formally petition the President over the matter. "The challenge we have is that you are not united. Let's all unite for a common cause," Ms Nalule said. [Gertrude Mutyaba]

## Municipality okays lease

**MASAKA.** Masaka Municipal Council has bowed to pressure and finally accepted to sub lease Kumbu Housing Estate to sitting tenants. This was announced by Masaka mayor Godfrey Kayemba Afaayo during the passing of the municipality budget for Financial Year 2018/2019 last Friday. During a council meeting chaired by the municipality speaker Irene Nantongo, Mr Kayemba revealed that council had agreed to sub lease the land at Kumbu on Plot 55-56 Old Bukoba Road and Plot 98-104 Forest Road in Kimaanya/Kyabakuzza Division. [Malik F. Jjingo]