

Police blasted over aiding brutal mining investors

By John Agaba

Some investors in the mining and oil sectors are violating human rights of the local people and getting away with it. They are aided by Police officers, resident district commissioners (RDCs) and, at times, the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) party chairpersons, a new report has revealed.

The investors condemn their employees to work in extremely intolerable conditions, pay them peanuts and, in extreme cases, subject them to physical assault. But, they cannot be investigated and arraigned in court because they are protected by law enforcement officers who silence any whistleblower or human rights defender trying to vouch for justice for the poor workers.

Titled Human Rights Defenders and Corporate Accountability in Uganda, the report by a non-governmental organisation — Laspnet — illustrates how the Police and RDCs are ruthless when protecting dirty investors in the Albertine Graben and other parts of the country where mining takes place.

The officers carry out calls, ranging from killing any form of exhibits that can implicate the investors to physically harassing and threatening and, at times, arresting human rights defenders, just so to protect the investors. At times, the Police and RDCs even aid the investors to orchestrate their dirty dealings.

Carried out between August and October, the report also implicated officials from the internal affairs and local government ministries as well as intelligence officers both at the district and sub-county levels who were abetting the injustices. The security agencies accounted for 66.4% of the threats to human rights defenders.

"Most of the threats come under the claim that human rights defenders are inciting the public and causing insecurity and as chairpersons and custodians of security in the districts, they have a role to play so there is no turmoil," Gerald Tushabe, an independent researcher and lecturer of philosophy at Makerere University, said while presenting the report findings in Kampala on Friday.

The report documented threats of arrests by regional and divisional Police commanders in Kabarole, Bushenyi, Hoima, Masindi and Nwoya districts.

In Bushenyi, it is alleged that a district Police



Laspnet executive director Sylvia Namubiru and consultant Gerald Tushabe speaking to journalists in Kampala last week. Photo by Ramadhan Abbey

commander (DPC) was involved in illegal gold mining and threatened human rights defenders who challenged the illegality with arrest.

In Fort Portal, three human rights defenders were arrested when they had gone to collect information that they were to use in a High Court case against Fedsult Engineering Ltd. Fred Kyaligonza, Jackson Magezi and Prosper Businge, were arrested and charged with illegal fishing and poisoning of fish under the Fish Act.

BETWEEN THE LINES

■ The report called for strengthening of government oversight of extractive activities and cancellation of licences, with punitive damages, in clear cases of rights abuses or environmental damages.

Another group of human rights defenders, including NGO workers and journalists, were threatened with arrests when they tried to get information concerning a demonstration by artisan miners in Harugongo, in Kabarole.

The report implicated an RDC in Hoima

for threatening human rights defenders. The RDC's office forced NGOs to stop conducting community meetings in the district and the NGOs have had to shift workshops to other districts.

Whereas the Directorate of Public Prosecutions was not cited as having direct involvement in threatening or causing arrests of human rights defenders, the report faults several of the directorate's officers, who it says sanctioned trumped up charges against the human rights defenders when there was not enough evidence to warrant prosecution.

A respondent working with ActionAid Uganda decried the complicity of the state corporations in the eviction of artisanal miners in Mubende early August.

"The challenge of secrecy and lack of transparency by government has plagued the oil and gas sector from its nascent days. The country needs to adopt the necessary legal framework for the promotion and protection of human rights defenders, according to international human rights instruments and standards, notably the UN declaration of Protection of human rights defenders," Joy Katono of Laspnet said.

During the meeting, several participants called for Action Aid's bank accounts, frozen this year, to be unfrozen.



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