Evictions. The Commission of Inquiry heard that the army aided officials from the Office of the Prime Minister to evict people from 28 villages in Hoima District.

UPDF evict, beat Hoima residents, grab land

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HOIMA. Uganda Peoples Defence Forces (UPDF) soldiers have been accused of participating in violent displacement of residents and land grabbing in the oil-rich region.

The Commission of Inquiry into land matters heard that the army aided officials from the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), which oversees refugee issues, to evict people from 28 villages in Kyangwali Sub-county, Hoima District.

Witnesses told the commission that after the mass eviction, OPM officials led by senior principal settlement officer, Mr Charles Bafaki, allocated 12 square kilometres of land at Katikara to UPDF where the institution established a detach.

It is alleged that OPM officials in charge of refugees violently and illegally evicted more than 25,000 residents and in 2013 gave the land away for Congolese refugees to settle on.

Mr Bafaki and the principal surveyor in the Department of Surveys and Mappings, Mr Vianny Lutaaya, as well as former Hoima resident district commissioner, Jean Kaliba, are among the government officials named in the displacement of people from 28 villages in 2013 purporting to create vacant possession for refugees.

Witnesses told the Justice Catherine Bamugemereire-led Commission that sat in Hoima that the eviction led to loss of lives, rape of women, children dropping out of school and destruction of property. It forced thousands to seek refuge in Kyangwali Sub-county.

During a fact-finding mission in Bukinda I Parish, the evictees told the commission that the officials have since rented out their land to commercial farmers.

Maj Wilson Mutahi was named before the commission as one of the beneficiaries of the land grab, setting up a farm on which he reportedly employs 150 workers.



Probe. Justice Catherine Bamugemereire (left) listens to Mr Nestori Kanyesigye (in yellow t-shirt), a former Kasonga A Parish councillor in Hoima District last week. PHOTO BY FRANCIS MUGERWA

It is alleged that the officer deployed soldiers to guard 10.12 square kilometres of land, but they instead harassed and terrorised residents in Ngurwe, Nyakatehe, Ngoma and Malembo villages.

Some of the workers the Commission found on Maj Mutahi's farm included Mr Malcom Bahati, from Kanungu District, who told the commission that he and more than 200 workers were brought to cultivate the soldier's farm.

"You can now see double standards. You evict nationals claiming that there is no sufficient land for refugees but there is vacant land including this," Ms Joyce Gunze Habaasa one of the commissioners said.

> "You evict nationals claiming that there is no sufficient land for refugees but there is vacant land including this," JOYCE GUNZE HABAASA, ONE OF THE COMMISSIONERS

Earlier, a pastor, Mr Kosea Kanyamukuma of United Pentecostal Church turned up with his worker Erica Mushango whose leg was injured and bleeding.

"He (Mushango) was beaten by UPDF soldiers who are terrorising us in Kyangwali," Mr Kanyamukuma, who claims to have a 750-acre piece of land in Malembo village said.

Evidence before the commission indicated that more than 1,000 people are living in makeshift structures in a camp at Kitooro-Itambiro after they were evicted from Nyamiganda A, Nyamiganda B, Buhumuriro, Kentomi and Bukinda-1 villages.

The Member of Parliament for Buhaguzi County, Mr Daniel Muheirwe, told the commission that the internally displaced persons are suffering without help from their own government, which is receptive to refugees.

"The character of government officials led by Mr Bafaki is so funny that even when the prime minister directed that these people should be given relief food, they didn't. Instead, they went ahead and established a check-point between Hoima and Kagadi at River Nguse where locals are made to pay each time they are crossing [the river]," Mr Muhairwe said.

The legislator revealed that attempts by the evictees to return to their land as directed by the prime minister were foiled and a purported verification committee, which has never made a report, was established.

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