

Mabira: The disappearing forest

Depleted. Despite several efforts by various agencies and leaders to save Mabira Forest, encroachers have continued to deplete it of its beauty. **Sudhir Byaruhanga** delves into how inside Mabira lies an empty shell of the forest.

A crack of gunfire exploded on April 12, 2007 in Uganda's capital as security forces attempted to stamp out riots provoked by plans to give away Mabira Forest Reserve.

Three people died, including an Indian in a protest laced with racial overtones.

The march was organised by environmentalists, opposition leaders and religious groups, who harboured antipathy towards a proposal to allow the Mehta Group to clear a quarter of the Mabira Forest Reserve to grow sugarcane.

The 300 square km expanse east of Kampala, contains some of the last patches of natural forest in Uganda and serves as an important water catchment area.

Government and the investor immediately backed off the plan amid public outrage. Yet reports have emerged about illicit logging that threatens the existence of this rain forest.

The sun rises at dawn as we commence a journey towards Mabira, the second largest rainforest, which occupies an expanse of 300 square km on Kampala-Jinja highway.

A cradle for species, it embraces gently in its arms many endangered species.

The rich canopy blended by the chirping sound of birds and fragrances of nature is an allure for those who are captivated by nature.

There are also rare millipedes in this forest. Yet all these are at risk of extinction as encroachers continue to destroy their natural habitat by illicit logging.

It is a major cause of concern that if the destruction is not immediately halted, the forest will be extinct.

Kinoni is a hamlet on the outskirts of a forest, which is occupied by a small community. Here, we encountered some men carrying machetes and marching towards the forest.

We were told that they are part of the logging cartel who report to their puppet masters.

"What happens here, is that any person will go to the forest and choose the best tree he or she wants and will cut it down," says a local, who didn't want his identity revealed fearing reprisal.

During our trek with the cameraman, a canopy of trees shielded us from the punishing sun.

It was not long before we found an area, where locals burn charcoal.

Most of the trees here have been cut to provide charcoal, a cheap porous black solid used for cooking by most households across the country.

There are hardly any trees as old as the forest itself in all places where they are burning charcoal.

As we went further to see the level of destruction, stamps of cut trees dot the area. The stamps vary from freshly cut trees to those felled years ago. Some of the meandering streams, which fed off the rich ecosystem are gradually drying up due to the reduced amount of rain that falls in this ever green forest.

It took us about five minutes to walk through a maze of young trees and shrubs making a boulevard on Jinja highway. Whereas the big trees litter the highway, inside lies an empty shell.

We returned into the pathways that led us to locals we found burning charcoal a few meters from Najjembe Trading Centre, a famous spot where roast meat is served to travellers.

This is close to National Forestry Authority Eco System office. Smoke from embers of burning charcoal filled the air towards Najjembe Trading Centre. Most of the mature trees have been cleared for charcoal. The loggers prefer to fell trees at dawn or in the dark of the night.

Shs20,000

Cost. The amount of money, according to Mr Mutwalibi at which residents sell the trees. This he said is because of the biting poverty levels in the area.

In order to disguise, we wore shrubs to fit within the pattern of lush greenery. After camouflaging for about two hours, a woman dressed in the same uniform as vendors at Najjembe, appeared at the scene.

She looked suspicious as she checked if a heap of logs covered with soil had burnt into charcoal. She, however, left after finding out that the charcoal was not ready.

We later trekked into the deeper recesses of this rain-forest. We encountered the babbling noises of monkeys and the cracking sound of dry leaves that we walked on, which



Degraded. Charcoal that has been burnt out of trees inside Mabira Forest. PHOTO BY SUDHIR BYARUHANGA

alerted the charcoal burners to take off. Because they are not sure of what might befall them, every sack they fill is hidden away from the furnace. Later, they will come and collect the charcoal, since they are not hiding far from where we are.

These people don't only cut trees for charcoal, they also cut young trees, to improvise ropes for tying their charcoal sacks.

As we walked further through the sugarcane plantation, we found people carrying charcoal. Others hid as soon as they noticed our presence.

I asked Michael Ojja, the Rwankima sector manager, why these culprits are not apprehended. "Illegal activities happen everyday, but we have tried to reduce them. I happened to come here in 2004 when there was rampant encroachment on the forest. At least when you move around and interview people you will appreciate that we have tried to reduce the cutting of trees," Mr Ojja told the *Daily Monitor*.

There is a 51-man team from National Forestry Authority, UPDF and the Environmental Police, which are supposed to protect Mabira Forest. Yet with the magnitude of destruction, one could presume

that they are complicit or connive in the illicit logging. I further probed Ojja to explain to us why his team is failing to protect the rainforest.

"You see, all these teams when they joined NFA they had different expectations, they expected to be paid facilitation which is not forthcoming. This sometimes demoralises them because this is a special assignment. As NFA, we also need facilitation, but we only have one ailing pickup and a motorcycle to patrol the 300 square kilometers of the forest cover. We always sacrifice and walk long distances patrolling the forest. Another challenge is the mushrooming towns around Mabira, which are putting a lot of pressure on the forest," Ojja said.

As we approached the route to the forest through sugarcane plantation in Najjembe, we met some youngsters, who were carrying wood and some immature tree stems for firewood.

They all dashed in the forest fearing arrest. Next to the plantation was a dirt road that snakes through the bigger part of the forest in this area.

Locals said the road is always used by trucks to ferry logs from the forest. Here, we unraveled huge

trees which had been cut and will be ferried soon. "The people come here and cut trees without any fear, and chop them into movable logs, which they load on the trucks. Sometimes when the rangers (NFA) enforcement team find you, they agree on the amount that will be doled to them," a resident of the area revealed.

On our third day we travelled to Sese, Wanende Village, which is less than five kilometres from the NFA offices. Here, homesteads of people, who have encroached the forest dot this area.

We commenced our journey at dawn and by 5 am, the light blue sky illuminated by a full moon shone across the dark and dicey paths towards the forest. As the sunrise emerged, we found huge trees, which had been felled.

They were the biggest logs of all the places we visited. It is such old trees, which have been felled that drop seeds that later sprout into a forest. Cutting such trees means wiping out species.

As we ascended to the top of this hill, we discovered a patch of dry savannah grassland.

Locals say this was once swamp. Next to the forest we found some homesteads burning charcoal and it

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Issue. "The people come here and cut trees without any fear, and chop them into movable logs, which they load on the trucks. Sometimes when the rangers (NFA) enforcement team find you, they agree on the amount that will be given to them," NFA RESIDENT

Budget for the patrol team Shs2m



Kampala-Jinja high way. Motorists drive through Mabira Forest recently. PHOTO BY MICHAEL KAKUMIRI



Felled. A big tree that was cut for timber in Mabira Forest recently. PHOTO BY SUDHIR BYARUHANGA

is hard for environmental protectors to suspect an illegal activity as smoke was seen coming from private land.

Downhill, in Wanende, Sese, we found men cutting trees with an axe who allowed us to film them. The trees are a source of soft wood.

The councillor of Lugazi Municipality, Mr Lukyamuzi Mutwalibi, who has lived near the forest, told *Daily Monitor* why people continue to carryout illegal activities in the forest.

"This, is a responsibility of the central government, which should come in to sensitise people and introduce poverty eradication programmes. This is because some

people cut trees, which they sell for a paltry Shs20,000," he said.

Another source claimed that some men in plainclothes have guns and provide protection to the loggers during day and night.

We were trailed by one of the NFA supervisors Benson Kiplagat. He wanted to know who granted us permission to enter the forest.

But when I asked him tough questions as to why people continue to cut trees without fear, he said that, "the main office in Kampala will answer that question" as he walked away in fear.

Mr. Ojja said he can't rule out the fact that some soldiers and police are

involved in the illicit logging because they are sometimes compelled by the unforgiving conditions which they have to endure while protecting a treasure within their reach. "Sometimes the people in this area report to us because our security personnel are involved in logging, but we use other tactics to ensure we arrest the problem," Ojja said.

He further said the demand for the product in this forest reserve is very huge, therefore locals always monitor their movement.

"They know where Ojja is and other officers before targeting trees in the blind zones. At times they also compromise our teams such as the

ISSUES

Demand. Authorities note that the demand for the soft wood logs in this forest reserve in Wanende, Sese is very huge, a reason residents have continued cutting down trees.

Insecurity. Sources claim some plainclothed armed men provide protection to the loggers in the forest.

No pay. It was revealed that a 20-man team of locally trained patrol personnel have not received their allowances for one year.

Urbanisation. Mr Ojja notes that the mushrooming towns around Mabira are putting a lot of pressure on the forest as many people are looking for means of survival and land for establishing settlement.

patrol men whose allowances take long to come," he revealed.

As the law enforcement officers laden with many tasks, it was revealed to us that a 20-man team of locally trained patrol personnel have not received their allowances for one year.

"My budget for the patrol men is Shs2 million, which is never forthcoming," he said.

On our third day into the jungle, we walked for more than a kilometre at 5am tracing for the loggers.

Stealthily we tried to locate some men who were cutting trees, but they heard our footsteps and fled. They smelt a perfume I was wearing about 50 meters away.

When we approached the place where they had just cut a tree, we were welcomed by a makeshift structure. We found traces of food and the containers they use for serving.

"Illegal activities happen everyday, but we have tried to reduce them. I happened to come here in 2004 when there was rampant encroachment on the forest. At least when you move around and interview people you will appreciate that we have tried to reduce the cutting of trees."

MR MICHAEL OJJA, THE RWANKIMA SECTOR MANAGER

There was also a makeshift stove an indication that these people work for long hours inside the forest without being noticed. It was at this spot that we decided to replenish as we mulled over what to do next, suspecting that the loggers would come back.

We got a vantage point, where my camera person William Kintu would film the activity in case they returned. I covered Kintu with shrubs.

After waiting under the scorching sun for about seven hours, the men returned hoping we had left. They carried the heavy log over a makeshift structure and picked the handsaw which they had hidden nearby.

These well-built men work nonstop and could hardly talk to each other in order to avoid echoes that would alert patrol men if there were any.

They were not worried about being found by the enforcement team. As we traversed this area, we hardly saw any presence of men in uniform.

"We try to do our best, like I said, sometimes people monitor us so they will do something in your backyard," Ojja responded.

As dusk blanketed the area, the men lit big kerosene lamps which they used to overcome darkness. When it clocked 10pm, we stealthily moved to where Kintu, my camera-person was, adjacent to the area where the logging was taking place.

After 30 minutes of moving away from the scene of logging, we felt that we were out of harm's way.

Tracing our footsteps, we were able to move towards the exit of the forest on footpaths until we found our driver as we concluded our investigation.

If Mabira is to be saved, government will need to offer pragmatism, remunerate law enforcement officers well and punish the puppet masters, who run logging cartels.