

More forest land in Jinja given out

JINJA

By Charles Kakamwa

Fresh findings by the commission of inquiry into land indicate that the entire Kimaka Forest Reserve in Jinja municipality has been given out to individuals as opposed to earlier information.

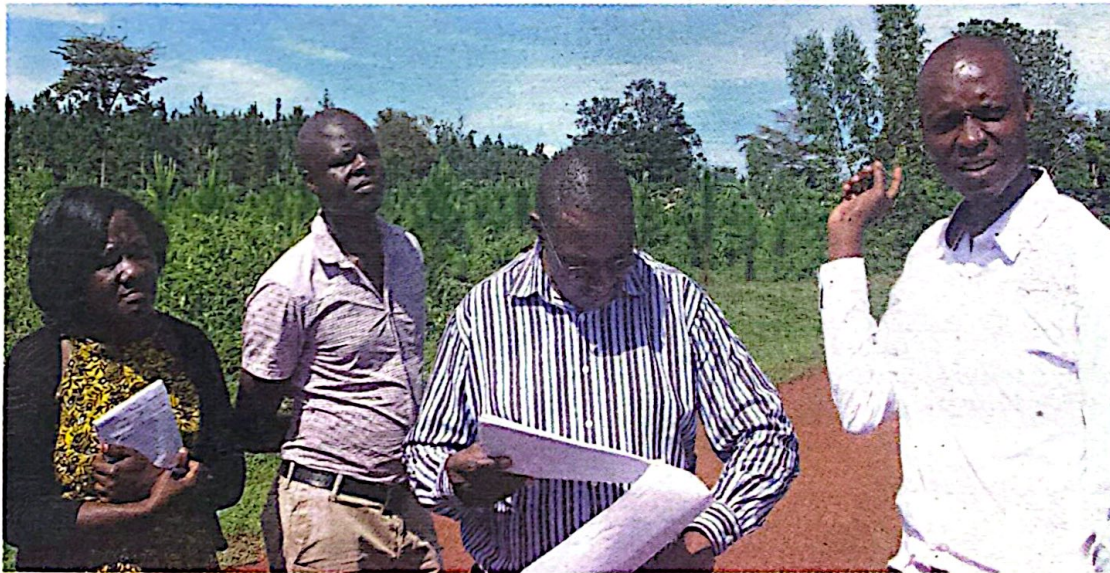
In June this year, when the commission headed by Justice Catherine Bamugemereire held open hearings in Jinja, it was revealed that of the 47 hectares of the forest reserve, only 18 plots, mostly measuring 50x100ft and 100x100ft, had been parceled out to applicants.

However, when members of the commission revisited Jinja for more inquiries last week, it landed on shocking information that the whole forest land had been given out to individual owners.

"We are shocked by this matter. We thought we were investigating titles of 18 plots, but now it turns out that there are 53 land titles. It appears the whole forest has been taken," Ebert Byenkya, the lead counsel of the commission, remarked.

More shocking was the revelation that all the 53 are freehold land titles, yet the law restricts people from owning freehold land titles in forest reserves.

"It seems there is a deliberate scheme to take this prime land. Though the forest and National Forestry Authority (NFA) offices are still there, they seem to be sitting on land already given away. There is need for urgent



Naguti (left) with Ebert Byenkya, the lead counsel of the commission (second-right) and Edward Nnume, the secretary Jinja district land board (right) during a visit to Jinja on Thursday.

Photo by Charles Kakamwa

action," Byenkya added.

The team led by Frederick Ruhindi, one of the commissioners, comprised town clerk Francis Byabagambi, municipal surveyor Robert Kitimbo and district land board secretary Edward Nnume. They were on a tour of the forest on Thursday. The forest is one of the public properties affected by land grabbing in Jinja.

They were guided on the tour by Rennie Naguti, the NFA range manager for Kyoga.

Ruhindi, who said the scope of investigations would be widened, said they would re-examine earlier

testimonies and that the concerned authorities should furnish the commission with correct details of all the forest land beneficiaries.

According to Ruhindi, information from the municipal officials was conflicting and misleading.

The forest situated along the Jinja-Budondo road, sits along the banks of River Nile.

During their three-day stay, the team also visited other affected properties including that owned by the National Fisheries Resources Research Institute (NaFIRRI), Uganda Railways Corporation (URC) and Church of

Uganda's Busoga Diocese.

It learnt that several of the recommendations made during their June visit such as cancelling of illegal land titles had not been implemented.

In Walukuba/Masese division, it was realised that an investor identified as Hared, recently fenced off a piece of land belonging to NaFIRRI, which is under contestation, leaving only a small stretch with the institute staff houses. It is alleged that threats have been issued to some of the institute staff.

At Wairaka in Butembe county, Jinja, the team found Jadhvani Hares, the

Other places toured include Busoga Mall building on Aldina Road in Jinja municipality reportedly owned by businessman Simpson Birungi, Busoga Diocese land in Masese and Bugembe, construction sites at Magwa, Railways land in Walukuba, Jinja ministerial zonal land offices and the Jinja Pier.

OTHER PLACES TOURED

director of Favourite Enterprises, still occupying land owned by NaFIRRI, despite being advised to vacate in June.

The land was given to NaFIRRI as compensation for another piece in Jinja town. It surrendered the land to pave way for the construction of the Civil Service College, according to Dr Anthony Taabu, the director of NaFIRRI.

In Loco village, it was revealed that a railway crossing and signpost were illegally uprooted to facilitate the construction of a mosque by Jinja central division LC3 chairman Mubarak Kirunda.

URC officials accused Kirunda of illegally constructing on their land, disregarding advice of the corporation. However, Kirunda argued it was a project built on public land intended to help the public.