

# 10 tribes claim part of Semuliki park land

**Evicted.** They claim they were evicted from the park in 1983 by president Milton Obote II government.

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**BUNDIBUGYO.** At least 10 clans among the Babwisi tribe in Bundibugyo District are claiming ownership of a seven square mile land inside the Semuliki National Park.

The clans that have now united under Matongo Lost Land Recovery Families' Group (MLLRFG), claim they were evicted in 1983 by then president Milton Obote II government from the areas of Bukondo, Mpiika, Bomboro, Mamilimili, Ngalala, Tokwe, Lumbulumbu and Kichanga, all now in the national park.

The then government argued that the area had been turned into a game reserve by the colonial government in 1932. It has since 1993 been gazetted as a national park.

The MLLRFG chairperson, Mr Cornelius Bakecura, told *Daily Monitor* in an interview on Monday that the clans claiming land include Bahanda, Bahombi, Babomboli, Batogho and Babandi. The others are the Bandikiteganwa, Bandikulya, Babukulu, Mandimagwara (Babandi sub-clans) and Bandimugumo, a sub-clan of Banyangule.

"Our great grandfathers led



**Attraction.** A tourist at the Sempaya hot springs in Semuliki National Park recently. FILE PHOTO

by Kitara settled in these places after originating from Bunyoro. Our fathers lived in those areas until when the British government evacuated the people from the areas near River Semuliki following an outbreak of sleeping sickness. They returned and later got evicted in 1983," Mr Bakecura said.

He said there are now more than 700 families spread across all the 10 clans that have lived as squatters on the land that was given to them by

friends when they were evicted but now need to return to their land.

Mr Bakecura said they are in the process of petitioning the British High Commission in Uganda, the Office of the President and other relevant departments of government asking to be restituted to their land.

"Our hosts are threatening to send us packing because we have overstayed our welcome. The population has increased and the hosts now want to use their land

## THE PARK

**Size.** The park sits on 220 square kilometres of land, with an altitude of 670-760m above sea level.

**Upgrade.** Semuliki Forest Reserve was created in 1932 and upgraded to national park status in 1993. It is the only tract of true low-land tropical forest in East Africa, hosting 441 recorded bird species and 53 mammals.

Semuliki National Park sprawls across the floor of the Semuliki Valley on the remote, western side of the Rwenzori. Hot springs bubble up from the depths of the valley to demonstrate the powerful subterranean forces that have been shaping the rift valley during the last 14 million years.

to feed their own children. We ask government to sort us out," he said.

The group's treasurer, also former Kalungu Woman MP, Ms Florence Kintu, said the scattering after eviction in 1983 affected many people but they are now ready for dialogue with government to agree on what chunk to be opened for resettlement. Ms Kintu belongs to one of the clans claiming the land.

"Bundibugyo has scarcity of land and this may lead to insecurity because the scattered people are being squeezed where they are. We need to dialogue with government to peacefully accept to hand back part of the national park to the original owners," Ms Kintu said.

However, Mr Simbilicious Gessa, the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) public relations officer, said on Sunday that their legal team is yet to receive any claim over land in the park.

Mr Gessa, who said Semuliki National Park continues to co-exist with the neighbouring communities, advised the claimants to seek legal redress or engage the Ministry of Lands to ensure the matter is handled before it causes insecurity.

"UWA holds land in trust of the people of Uganda. Much as we have not yet got any formal complaint, boundaries can always be opened if a decision is made by court to settle any land disputes" Mr Gessa said.