

Land grabbers claim Mbale Central Police Station

By Paul Watala

The commission of inquiry on land has learnt that suspected land grabbers have started pursuing documents to claim ownership of Mbale Central Police Station.

Stephen Ahweera, the acting Police commander of Mbale district, made the revelation on Monday while testifying before the land probe committee.

The commission, led by Lady Justice Catherine Bamugemereire, is probing the effectiveness of law, policies, and processes of land acquisition, administration, management and land registration in Uganda.

It is currently in Mbale, camped at Resort Hotel in Mbale town, to investigate reports of rampant land grabbing.

Appearing as the first witness, Ahweera told the commission that a group of people recently went to the Central Police Station in Mbale with documents.

He said the group asked to know if the Police authorities had a land title for the facility.

The facility is located on Republic Street.

"We have fearless and courageous land grabbers, who recently came to Mbale Central Police Station claiming ownership. Given a chance, these people can claim any facility at any time," Ahweera told the commission.

"This group of men have started chasing for documents claiming ownership of the police station that has been in existence for decades," he added.

Ahweera also revealed that at least 30 land-related conflict cases are registered in one month in Mbale. He added that the Police is overstretched by land grabbing conflicts, adding



Parima Patel taking oath as he appeared before the land probe in Mbale yesterday. Photo by Paul Watala

that unless the vice is checked by concerned authorities, more clashes and killings would continue, which will pose a security threat.

Asked by Bamugemereire to name some of the suspected land grabbers, Ahweera declined, preferring to do it in camera.

"I will be ready to give you the names of these serial land grabbers in camera because of the nature of my work," he said.

In her opening remarks, Bamugemereire noted that Mbale is among the districts where complaints over land grabbing, encroachment on wetlands, forest reserves and government land are rife.

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She said it was unfortunate that Mbale district and municipal council authorities had given out roads to business people to develop.

Bamugemereire also blamed the increasing cases of land grabbing on officials working in the land registry, saying they double issue land titles to different parties.

She said the move has resulted into land conflicts and insecurity in the country, hence scaring away potential investors.

During the same hearing, a prominent coffee dealer, Stephen Wekomba, was accused by the director of Elgon Nursery and Primary School, David Solobi, of attempting to grab his

property. Solobi made the accusation as he lodged his complaint before the land commission.

"Wekomba and another person tried to apply to the custodian board and land registry in an attempt to grab my facility, which is currently accommodating a primary school run by the family after the death of our father," he said.

"The facility, located on plot 16 on Naboa Road in Mbale municipality, was given to my father by the Asians after the former president, Idi Amin, expelled them from the country. The district land board is now conniving with the people to grab my property," Solobi told the land probe team.

The fight for properties of the Asians expelled in 1972 by Amin in Mbale is fuelling conflicts between local business people and Ugandan Asian communities, hence causing insecurity.

The properties of the community commonly identified as "Asians", mainly business buildings and primary schools, are located in the Indian quarters in Industrial division, Republic Street and Nkokonjeru terrace.

Solobi said some of the Asians who returned to Uganda connive with non-Asians to grab the properties, adding that most of them claim to be relatives to the famous Patel family.

Parima Patel, who is part of the said family, appeared before the committee.

He said the properties belonged to Indian communities, adding that he is on the board of trustees that gives him powers to demand properties that belonged to the Patel family.

Patel told the commission that his family has been living in Mbale since 1982. He said he is a grandson of the late Patel Senior, who had also lived in Mbale several decades ago.