RIVER BLINDNESS ELIMINATION CELEBRATED IN BUNYORO

By Yosam Gucwaki

Residents of Bunyoro sub-region are celebrating a major public health milestone following the elimination of river blindness (Onchocerciasis) in the Budongo forest catchment area covering Masindi, Buliisa and Hoima districts.

For decades, communities living along rivers in these areas endured the devastating effects of the disease, which left many people with severe itching, skin damage, and in some cases permanent blindness.



Byakutaga flanked by other kingdom offcials speaking during the celebration of the elimination of river blindness in the Budongo catchment in Masindi district recently

ABOUT RIVER BLINDNESS

River blindness is caused by the parasitic worm Onchocerca Volvulus, which is transmitted to humans through repeated bites of infected Simulium blackflies.

These flies breed in fast-flowing rivers and streams. When an infected fly bites a person, the parasite enters the body as larvae, later developing into adult worms that live in nodules under the skin.

Female blackflies of the Simulium genus bite during the day and thrive near rapidly flowing rivers, making communities living near such water bodies particularly vulnerable.

River blindness is one of the neglected tropical diseases (NTDs), a group of illnesses that mainly affect poor and marginalised communities. Other NTDs include leprosy, elephantiasis, epilepsy and trachoma.

In Masindi district, residents living along rivers such as Kasokwa, Siiba and Waaki in Budongo sub-county, Nyantonzi, Labongo, Biiso and Kyabigambire were among the hardest hit by the disease.

According to residents of Nyantonzi sub-county, people living with the disease faced intense stigma, social injustice and discrimination.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Masindi district officials say that the elimination of river blindness has improved school enrolment and household incomes have increased.

CELEBRATION OF ITS ELIMINATION

Every 30th day of January, the world commemorates World Neglected Tropical Diseases Day in order to raise awareness about the burden of these illnesses. This year's commemoration that took place in Masindi also marked the celebration of the elimination of river blindness in the Budongo catchment area. The event was held at Nyantonzi Health Centre III in Katuugo village, Nyantonzi sub-county, Masindi district under the theme: *Unite, Act, and Eliminate."*

Drama groups performed skits portraying the stigma and discrimination that was once faced by those affected by the disease, as well as the long journey toward its elimination, which was officially achieved in 2017.

BUNYORO KINGDOM PRIME MINISTER

Presiding over the function, the prime minister of Bunyoro Kitara kingdom, Andrew Byakutaga, applauded the Government and development partners for their commitment to fighting the disease.

"Eliminating this disease is a very big achievement for the NRM Government. The families can now think for the future. Mothers can now see their children going to school and also communities engaging in different economic activities. There's no reason why we shouldn't thank the President for this fight," Byakutaga said.

The prime minister urged communities to continue working closely with government authorities in case similar health threats arise. Byakutaga also called on local governments and communities in the Budongo catchment area to remain vigilant and report any resurgence of blackflies, which are responsible for transmitting the disease.

HEALTH OFFICERS SPEAK OUT

Dr Nicolas Kwikiriza Magambo, the district health officer for Masindi, praised the unity and co-operation shown by communities in the Budongo catchment area during the fight against the disease, noting that about 150,000 people had been affected. "River Blindness is a very devastating disease that affects life and productivity, and its elimination was a combined effort by the Government, the community and partners," Kwikiriza said.

Dr. John Turyagaruka, the former district health officer for Masindi, recalled that the first complaints about the mysterious illness emerged in 1989 when residents began reporting persistent itching.