



Land probe document specialist Julius Sseremba (left) takes notes as Deziderio Kasujja and his wife, Restetuta Nampeera (wearing gomesi), explain conflict between them and Ntaganda over a forest reserve in Kajjansi as land probe lead counsel Ebert Byenkya (right) listens during a field visit to Kajjansi yesterday. Photo by Maria Wamala

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NFA official pinned over empty forest reserve

By Betty Amamuklrori

Members of the commission of inquiry into land matters were yesterday shocked to find the Kajjansi Central Forest Reserve bare with only tree stumps, anthills and shrubs.

The probe team arrived at the reserve at about 10:00am. The team had the outdoor session without their chairperson, Justice Catherine Bamugemereire and commissioner Rose Nakayi.

The team was received by members of the National Forestry Authority (NFA) led by the executive director, Michael Mugisa. Others on the NFA team included Ruth Kisakye, the legal officer, Bernard Obar, surveyor and Charles Ojandu, the Kajjansi Entebbe beat forest supervisor.

The probe team was shocked to find plain land, with large scattered pits signalling that brick laying had been done on the land instead of a forest.

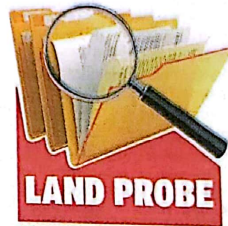
The NFA team found a hard time explaining to the commission about the deforestation on the 297 hectares of forest land following the giveaway of permits to 26 farmers to plant trees.

Ojandu explained that land was leased out to 26 forest farmers to plant trees. This was done, until the farmers started harvesting the trees in large numbers.

Ojandu said the farmers reported that they had transferred their interests to businessman Cedric Nsoongoza, who is the elder brother of Ephraim Ntaganda, a Kampala businessman.

One of the people he claimed to have been mentioned in the dealings was a one Deziderio Kasujja, 79, who had earlier appeared before the commission to complain against Ntaganda. He accused Ntaganda of cutting down his trees on five hectares of land without his permission, with the aid of Police officers.

Ojandu said he received a call from Nsoongoza in August 2015, who told him that he had an agreement with



Kasujja. The agreement was for the sale of two acres of land to him, to plant trees.

"I told him that the permit wasn't transferable, but if he had intentions of acquiring the land, he had to write to the NFA management, declaring his interests. When I asked Kasujja about the agreement, he denied ever dealing with Nsoongoza," he told the commissioners.

He stated that when he later saw a massive destruction of trees, he informed his bosses, who advised him to convene a meeting with the locals and Nsoongoza.

"Ojandu said during the meeting, Nsoongoza reaffirmed that he had an agreement with the locals and even showed him proof of the agreements. He went ahead to level the land, but later NFA stopped the activities. Ojandu also pointed out truck at the site which he said was abandoned by Nsoongoza after it developed a mechanical fault.

His explanations, however, could not convince the commissioners, with some arguing that there was no way NFA could have let the farmers harvest all the trees in huge numbers without its permission and any regulation guiding them.

Kasujja pointed an accusing finger at Ojandu saying even when he complained through a one Aryema, a patrol officer, about Ntaganda using Police to fell his trees, he (Ojandu) laughed it off, and did not act.

"When my forest was being felled, you were visiting the area and

when I asked if you were aware of my complaints to your office, you laughed it off. I did not transfer my interests, you are all liars," Kasujja said.

"You were given a responsibility to look after the forest, but we do not see any forest. How come they harvested all the trees without your permission? You have let the people down and you have allowed the land to be degraded," Mary Oduka Ochan, a commissioner, told the NFA officials.

NFA boss' defence

Mugisa told the commission that at the time of felling the trees, he was in a meeting, but he was later able to deploy and stop further activities in the land and Nsoongoza was arrested.

"I learnt that farmers transferred their interests but it was done without our consent. There were so many illegal activities done here. However, we have constituted an investigation into the matter and we shall summon the farmers to testify," he said.

A one Mubarak Sekyanja, who the farmers accuse of being Nsoongoza's middleman, admitted before the commission that he, indeed, helped him to buy off interests from the farmers and said Kasujja wanted sh70m for his land, but Nsoongoza declined to grant his wish.

Sekyanja said NFA allowed them to transfer their interests at will, since they were the leaseholders. The leases were given out in 1997.

Ntaganda and Nsoongoza who were standing on the sidelines following the proceedings, declined to give a comment on the matter.

Currently, according to NFA, Nsoongoza has no lease and the institution is planning to plant trees on the land after clearing the wrangles.

Through Ochan, the commission ordered for the current status quo on the land, to be maintained, until all the illegalities done on the land are cleared by NFA.