

Buikwe officials clash over Mehta plan to develop mayor's gardens

Issue. Lugazi Municipal Mayor Deo Tuwesigye Mbabazi insists that the land on Plot No.1-3 and 5-9 was gazetted to be an open place.

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BUIKWE. A row has erupted between the leadership of Lugazi Municipal Council and Lugazi Central Division following Mehta Group's plan to take over Lugazi Mayors' Gardens and erect a shopping mall, *Daily Monitor* has established.

The land which measures about an acre was initially the property of Mehta Group before being turned into mayor's gardens.

The Mehta Group owns Sugar Corporation of Uganda Limited (Scoul), Lugazi, which is Uganda's third largest sugar producer.

On 26 June, Scoul through its chief executive officer, Mr TS Sundaram, wrote to the Lugazi Municipal Council Town clerk, Mr Vincent Okurut, notifying him about the company's urgent need to redevelop the land.

"As you are aware, we have an urgent need to develop our land at the mango tree, by construction (sic) of a state-of-the-art mall, which will provide growth in the area," he said.

In the same letter, Mr Sundaram expressed shock that the Lugazi Town authorities had gazetted the land as a public open space without their consent.

"All the same, we were advised to apply to the National Physical Planning Board for consideration for change of land use from one public space to commercial," Mr Sundaram said.

He added that the Mehta Group was ready to provide an alternative piece of land to the town authorities which will create revenue for council/division.



Contested. Residents rest at Lugazi Mayor's Gardens which the Mehta Group wants to repossess. PHOTO BY DENNIS SSEBWAMI

But Lugazi Municipal Mayor Deo Tuwesigye Mbabazi insists that the land on Plot No.1-3 and 5-9 was gazetted to be an open place.

Interestingly, Scoul's proposal has already been backed by Lugazi Central Division leadership with the passing of the motion on February 28.

Paradoxically, the municipal council on August, 9 watered down the resolution by the division council and halted any plan to redevelop the land.

This stalemate has culminated into a verbal exchange between Mr Stephen Mpiima, the Lugazi Central Division mayor and Mr Mbabazi, with the former accus-

ing jurisdiction. Mr Mpiima added that Mr Mbabazi had no authority to cancel a resolution passed by a local government.

"They (municipal council) have no authority whatsoever to cancel our resolution. Lugazi Central Division is an independent entity and the land is in an area we control. So we are the right people to decide, not the municipal council," he said during an interview last Friday.

Mr Mpiima said Scoul, which is the owner of the land, cannot be blocked from developing its land as long as it is ready to give them another open place to serve as the mayor's gardens.

"The space the municipal council is claiming ownership of, belongs to Mehta. He has a title, the municipal council does not even have a single document to prove their ownership," Mr Mpiima added.

He said as division, they didn't see any problem with Mehta's development plan since they are ready to give them alternative land. "He gave us the space opposite the cathedral, and he will develop it into a leisure park before handing it over to us. As a local government, we welcomed the idea because it will boost our revenue," Mr Mpiima added.

On the other hand, Mbabazi wonders why Mpiima is backing Mehta, whom he accuses of unfairly evicting people from different places under the guise of development.

"We don't know what Mehta wants because he is taking every piece of land in this area under the guise of development. If he wants to construct a shopping mall, let him construct in the space he fenced off near the lorry park," he said.

He added: "Although he (Mehta) is the landlord, we as council, we own the *kibanja*. So we are claiming for our *kibanja* not his land. The Constitution protects us as bona fide occupants," he said.

Voices

"We welcome the development because that open space has been used by wrongdoers. I am seeing the construction of a mall creating jobs for the youth,"
STEVEN OLIJABO
LUGAZI CENTRAL
DEPUTY MAYOR

"That's a bad decision, we can't lose our green space in the town. It's a place where we organise various function and we should not let it go,"
STEVEN MUGOYA,
RESIDENT

ing the latter of overstepping his