

Regional News

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The previous eviction exercise was marred by corruption and political interference, with the rich allegedly buying off enforcement officers to continue operating illegally in gazetted swamps.

BY NOELINE NABUKENYA

The Ministry of Water and Environment, in collaboration with the environmental regulatory body, the National Environment Management Authority (Nema), has announced a second round of a crackdown on wetland encroachers across the country.

The restoration activities, expected to kick off this month, will affect those who were ordered to vacate the area in 2024 but declined.

Nema's restoration order gives a person up to 21 days to remove what they have developed in a wetland and vacate.

The directive, issued by Water and Environment Minister, Mr Sam Cheptoris, indicates that no encroachers will be spared. He made the remarks during the 2026 National Performance Review Conference in Kampala on April 15, alluding to a school in Seeta, Mukono Municipality, which he said was established in a wetland.

The previous exercise, the minister noted, was marred by corruption and political interference, with the rich reportedly buying off enforcement officers to continue operating illegally in gazetted wetlands.

He pointed at Kampala, Jinja and Mbale as having the highest number of endangered wetlands due to human activities, including settlements, farming and factories, among others.

Mr Cheptoris' directive comes about two years following a first major restoration exercise, with the most affected people being Lubigi dwellers in Nansana Municipality, Wakiso District.

Thousands of people were left homeless after their houses and commercial buildings which housed several businesses along the Kampala-Hoima road were brought down.

Areas affected in the last exercise were Ganda, Nasere, Nansana West 11A, Kiwuuwa, Nabweru South 11 and some parts of Nabweru South 3.

However, in some areas, schools, houses and multibillion apartments were earmarked for demolition and restoration orders which were issued expired

Wetlands: Will Nema crack whip on 'untouchable' encroachers?



Security personnel guard Nema enforcement team during evictions of residents of Nansana West II from Lubigi wetland in Wakiso District last year. PHOTO/ NOELINE NABUKENYA

but no activity took place.

These include Nakuwadde-Bbira, parts of Nabweru South Cell 3 in Wakiso and Kawaala, Katoogo and Bwaise cells in Kampala City.

Today, some of the owners of those buildings in question have since removed the marks and are carrying on with life normally.

Mr Erias Lukwago, the outgoing Lord Mayor for Kampala Capital City Authority, said if the renewed efforts to restore wetlands are to be successful, Nema should start with the 'untouchables'.

"I have talked about some of them [powerful wetland encroachers] in the past. As long as their structures remain standing without environmental study reports, whatever Nema is saying is nothing but political rhetoric," Mr Lukwago said.

He added that many malls constructed in wetlands around Kampala should be demolished for the country to appreciate that Nema is serious about restoring

NEMA ACT

Section 36 of the National Environment Act provides for the protection of wetlands and empowers authorities to demolish any structure that is fixed in, on, under or above any wetland.

The Act also allows districts to manage wetlands within their jurisdictions and ensure that their boundaries are clearly demarcated to limit encroachment.

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Mr Lukwago last year led evictees to Nema headquarters and met the executive director, Mr Barirega Akankwasah, to complain about the selective execution of the directive. A tribunal was established to investigate the matter.

Nema promised to make a follow-up, but this has not materialised.

Similarly, Mr John Bosco Sserunkuuma, a human rights defender and Nansana Municipality mayor-elect, who played a key role in attempting to stop selective eviction from the wetlands in 2024, expressed doubt about the effectiveness of the minister's directive.

He said despite raising an alarm about the double standards exhibited in the previous exercise, nothing was done.

"In Lubigi, there are two structures that render the minister's statement irrelevant. As the poor were being treated harshly, a factory producing local gin and a fuel filling station, with structures in this swamp were spared," he said.

Mr Sserunkuuma said Nema should stop double standards and treat every wetland encroacher equally regardless of their status.

"The fact is that some people own some pieces of land in Lubigi wetland and were paying nominal ground rent to Buganda Kingdom as we witnessed last time. Instead of evicting them,

guide them on which activities can be conducted in those areas," he said.

Ms Naomi Namara, the Nema spokesperson, said they have a list of all people authorised to set up development projects in wetlands.

"We are resuming [our operations] in the areas that we didn't conclude. There are houses in Lubigi which were marked for demolition, but people didn't vacate," she said, adding that after clearing Lubigi, the enforcement team will go to Munyonyo and Busabala.

Ms Namara said they had halted the evictions due to inadequate resources but they are returning in high gear with everything necessary to assist them in the enforcement of the law.

"We have got the funds, machines and enforcement teams ready. Let all those still staying in the identified areas vacate as soon as possible. We are not issuing any more alert notifications. If you have a restoration notice, that alone is enough," she added.

Mr Enoch Mulinda, the chairperson of those victims whose houses were pulled down in Lubigi in 2024, said Nema arrested 28 people and they spent two months in Luzira prison before they were granted bail.

The team has since filed a case against Nema to explain the grounds for demolishing their houses.

Court is set to start hearing the case on May 14.

Effects of degradation

Wetland degradation has compromised the potential of holding water and filtering pollutants.

This has caused natural calamities such as floods, pollution of Lake Wamala, Lake Kyoga and Lake Victoria, leading to declining fish stocks.

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The Act also empowers districts to manage wetlands within their jurisdictions and ensure that their boundaries are clearly demarcated so that even as water levels and wetland vegetation recedes, the communities are clear on where the boundaries lie.