

Ssese forests cleared for charcoal export

By Gerald Tenywa

Bukasa on Ssese Islands has two faces. One of them is known to people who left the place three years ago — Bukasa was sheltered by dense virgin forests — and the other where forests are being replaced by expansive gardens of rice.

In less than three years, the green wall has been torn to shreds by charcoal burners and rice farmers. In recent months, Bukasa has become a massive producer of charcoal, which is exported to Kenya.

"We should blame ourselves because Kenyans do not come here to burn charcoal," Godfrey Basaliddie, the Gombolola internal security officer, said.

Basaliddie said Bukasa is like a workshop with smoke from charcoal burning wafting through the air. In some cases, Bukasa sounds like a maize mill as chain saws cut through the trees. They convert the trees into either timber or charcoal.

Bukasa is being pushed on its knees. The neighbouring Buyovu island has been cleared of its forest cover.

Brig. Andrew Lutaya has been angered by the destruction taking place on Ssese. Commonly known for chauffeuring then rebel leader Yoweri Museveni from Uganda to Kenya through Lake Victoria during the five-year guerrilla war, which ended in 1986, Lutaya now has a new battle to fight — stop deforestation.

Over the weekend, Lutaya, a Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) veteran, encountered chunks of natural forests being burnt for charcoal, over the weekend.

"These trees were not planted by me. We have to think of the future. World Food Programme will be called in to distribute food when the rain fails," Lutaya said, adding that he would not sit back when the environment is being messed up.

On Sunday, Lutaya took *New Vision* to different areas, including the place where he said he impounded 600 bags of charcoal that were being exported to Kenya.

"I called the Police and they have not come. I gave a Policeman some fuel, but he did not show up. I had to guard that charcoal until 2:00am," Lutaya said.

He said some people had come claiming they did not cut down this charcoal from his land.

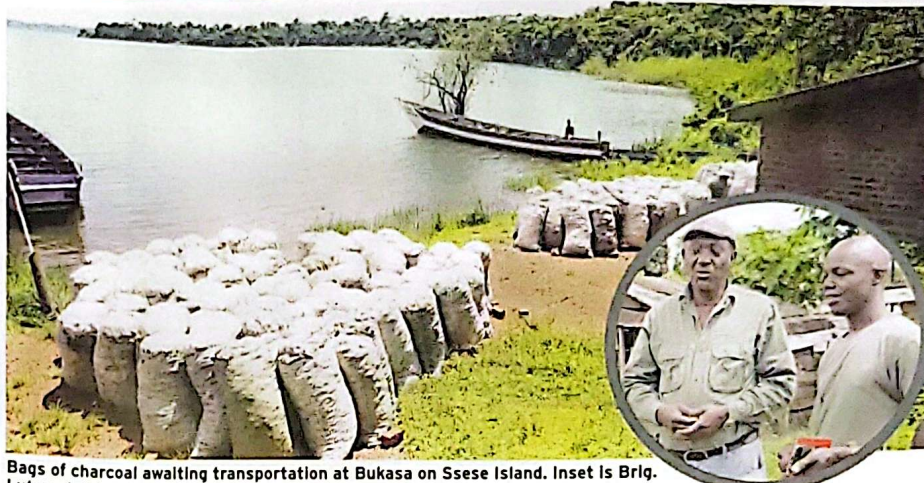
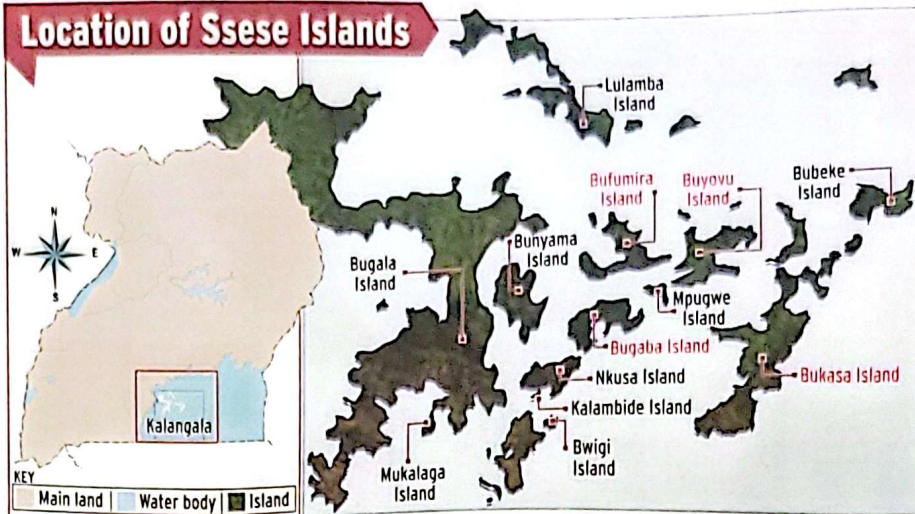
"I asked them where they got authority to cut down the trees and burn charcoal, but up to now they have failed to produce any form of clearance," he said.

Lutaya at times carries a rifle on his expeditions to rid the forest of illegal charcoal burners.

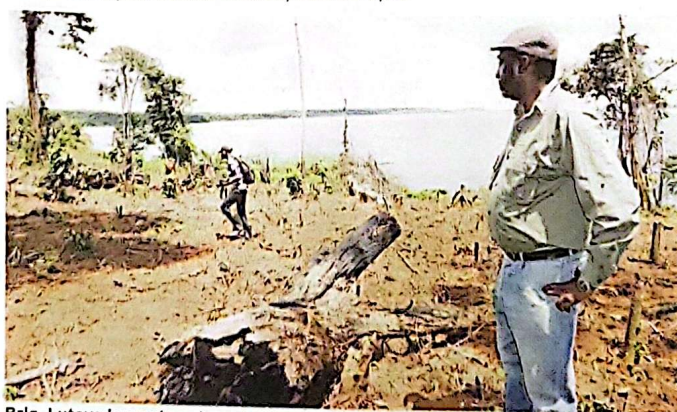
"When I am here they take off because they know forest destruction cannot take place under my watch," he said.

He also pointed out that

Location of Ssese Islands



Bags of charcoal awaiting transportation at Bukasa on Ssese Island. Inset is Brig. Lutaya talking to Basaliddie Photos by Gerald Tenywa



Brig. Lutaya inspects a degraded forest on Bukasa Island in Kalangala district

the forests gone, the bedrock of Bugala and other islands is getting exposed.

"The soil that used to cover the rocks has been washed by rain water, causing pollution in Lake Victoria," he said.

"How can such a simple thing like cooking cause destruction of the environment?" Lutaya wondered.

He suggested planting trees for charcoal saying

natural forests. Lutaya said in Rwanda, people are compelled to plant trees and when the trees mature, the owner has to seek permission to cut them down.

"How come people are coming from as far as Rwanda to cut down our trees without any intervention? The Government should compel people not to cut down trees, even if the trees are on their

He added that the islands are experiencing such a destruction because landlords have leased the land to people who cut the trees down."

He said he has shared what was going on with the state minister for works and transport, Katumba Wamala, who also hails from one of the 84 islands that make up Ssese. Wamala promised to engage Sam Chelimo to

He said they do not have control over Rwandans saying they hire land to grow rice. As they clear the land to grow rice, they cut down the trees, to be burnt for charcoal.

Basaliddie confirmed that there are migrant workers from Rwanda who disguise as visitors, but end up staying. Some do not have any legal documents about their stay in the country.

"I have registered all these people (Rwandans) including the ones who do not have documents and I forwarded their names to the district," he said, adding that he has encountered more than 200 Rwandese in April.

He blamed the immigration department for what he called failing to stop the influx of illegal immigrants into the country.

He also pointed out that some of the immigrants have started planting bananas, meaning that they did not expect to go back home anytime soon.

He said the farmers grow rice for either two or three seasons, and then move to another virgin land. They prefer the land under forests because it is fertile.

Basaliddie said some migrant workers are shifting from Bunyoro to Ssese, where they have destroyed Lake Victoria islands. Zinga, Bunyasi, Bufenira, Buyovu and Bugaba.

He said Bukasa alone has lost about 1,400 acres of natural forests to rice growers. He listed 400 acres in Damba LCI, 500 acres in Bunyasi, 200 acres in Kisamba, 100 acres in Mulama and 400 acres in Kyabisubi as areas that have been taken over by the rice growers.

The Kalangala district environment officer, Maurice Bafirawa, said they have given an ultimatum of June 30, to all rice growers to stop growing rice within the protection zone (200 metres from the shores) of Lake Victoria.

"We do not want to destroy their food and that is why we have given them enough time to harvest it," he said.

Less than 8% of forest remaining, most loss on private land

Uganda has continued to lose its natural forest cover currently estimated at 8%, according to the National Forestry Authority (NFA).

According to Paul Buyer, NFA's director of corporate affairs, the forest cover was 9% in 2015, having declined from 11% in 2011. The forest cover was estimated at 24% in 1990 and that reduced from 45% of the land cover about a century ago.

NFA manages 15% of the forests under the concept of sustainable use and another 15% is managed by the Uganda Wildlife Authority, which is the top conservation body in the country. The

The LCI chairperson of Lwanabatya blamed the destruction on desperate migrant workers from Rwanda, who have turned to rice growing to earn a living

Leaders blame Rwandans
Charles Eweru, the LCI chairperson of Lwanabatya in Kyamuswa sub-county, Kalangala, blamed the destruction on desperate fishermen and migrant workers from Rwanda, who