Government starts evicting wetland encroachers

KIBUKU

By Faustine Odeke and Lawrence Okwakol

The Government has started evicting encroachers on wetlands across the country following President Yoweri Museveni's directive to restore the degraded water catchment area and protect the ecosystem.

The Minister of Water and Environment, Sam Cheptoris, on Tuesday launched the campaign in Limoto wetland shared by Kibuku and Pallisa districts, after the June deadline for encroachers to leave the wetland elapsed.

Limoto swamp

Limoto swamp, covering 35 square kilometres, is linked to River Mpologoma catchment area and is the main water source in the region.

A total of 6,000 people had originally encroached on the wetland to grow rice by the time the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) intervened.

NEMA carried out a sensitisation and inventory exercise in 2016, where they identified and documented all the encroachers to help them get direct engagement for voluntary compliance.

BETWEEN THE LINES:

Addressing the district leadership, Cheptoris said because Government loves people, it will not employ harsh means of forcing people out but will encourage people to voluntarily leave the wetlands.

Cheptoris entered into an agreement with the farmers, who accepted the Government position to vacate the wetlands after harvesting the rice.

He said the Government is going to find alternative livelihood for over 1,500 people who have been growing rice and farming in the wetlands by starting irrigation schemes.

He said the benefits of wetlands, if left to rejuvenate, are much better than what people get from rice cultivation, which degrades the ecosystem.

Addressing Kibuku district leadership, Cheptoris said because the Government loves people, it will not employ harsh means of forcing people out, but will encourage them to voluntarily leave the wetlands.

He assured residents that whoever has a land title for any wetland issued after 1995 is carrying a useless title and should not waste time going to court for redress.

"I thank the people of Kibuku for respecting the President's decision, who allowed them to harvest their rice and leave the wetlands by July.

"Even our children need to find these wetlands sustainably used. They do not only provide us with fish but also have beautiful insects which attract tourists," Cheptoris said.



Minister Cheptoris planting a boundary mark at Limoto in Kibuku district recently

Demarcation

Collins Oloya, the commissioner for wetlands, said they will start demarcating the wetlands soon, now that the Government has availed them with money.

Oloya said people should not listen to impersonators who con them of money, saying they are officials from the ministry and need money to adjust the demarcation points.

"The intention of demarcating wetlands is to ensure protection and not as it has been rumoured that the Government has a hidden motive of grabbing the wetlands," Oloya said.

Deo Kabaali, the eastern Uganda regional wetlands co-ordinator, said measurements from the principal pillars should be put at the boundary and nobody should tamper with the buffer zone.

"Wetlands are completely different from forest reserves because we follow the ecological boundary and it is never straight," he said.

Charles Kadyama, the district chairperson, asked the minister to sensitise MPs, saying some of them give contradictory messages and encourage people to cultivate in wetlands.

Kadyama's appeal followed earlier resistance by residents to vacate the wetlands after being encouraged by some MPs, which led to some of them being arrested and prosecuted.

Christine Achokit, the NEMA representative, called on leaders at all levels to unite to ensure that wetlands are sustainably used to benefit people without interfering with the buffer zone.

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