

Minister wants independent force to protect forests

By Henry Nsubuga

The Government plans to instal an independent security group whose work will be to protect the national forest reserves from encroachers.

The state minister for environment, Mary Gorreti Kitutu said this will save the National Forestry Authority (NFA) from relying on the Police and the Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) which are currently beefing up the security of forests.

Kitutu, during her tour of Mabira Forest recently, said a number of forest guards, rangers and supervisors have been killed by the encroachers.

"Encroachers are armed with machetes and guns and our forest guards are not which has put their lives in danger," Kitutu said.

Cases

In January 2009 in Jubia Forest Reserve in Masaka district, Alfred Ezati, a forestry supervisor and his patrolman Emmanuel Asiimwe were hacked to death in the line of duty. Patrick Kalemera, a patrolman, was also killed.

Kitutu, who did not give details, also said other five forest rangers were killed by a mob as they were executing their official duties.

The minister said just like the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA), NFA must also be given an independent force to help in the protection of forests.

"Currently, UWA staff guarding the national parks are allowed to shoot at an armed poacher who seems hostile. I am also proposing the same for the NFA," she said.

Forests are important but fragile ecosystems, and they are facing severe threat worldwide.

Kitutu was touring Mabira to ascertain recent media reports that the bigger part of the forest had



Government officials standing next to a tree which was cut by illegal loggers in Mabira Forest recently. INSET: Mary Gorreti Kitutu. Photo by Henry Nsubuga

been encroached on and that trees were being cut down on a daily basis.

The minister was in company of Paul Musamali, the acting NFA executive director, Benjamin Kamukama, the regional range manager for lake shores and Mabira Forest staff.

During the tour, the team came across a big tree estimated to be over 100 years old which had been cut down by unknown loggers.

Michael Ojja, the Mabira Forest Lwankima sector manager, told the minister that the tree was felled over six months ago and it was people the nearby community who heard a loud thud and alerted the NFA rangers.

"They abandoned a power saw and other equipment which they were using. We have been keeping

who comes to pick the logs," Ojja said.

Mabira

Mabira is a rainforest area covering over 30,000 hectares stretching over the districts of Mukono, Buikwe and Kayunga.

According to Benjamin Kamukama, the regional range manager for lake shores, Mabira is the sixth largest forest in Uganda and was gazetted as a forest reserve in 1932.

"It is home to more than 312 tree species, 315 bird species, 23 small mammal species, 218 butterfly species and 97 moths species," Kamukama said.

He added that Mabira is complex with several enclaves.

Kamukama explained that because of the many enclaves and

managing the forest has been a big challenge as the neighbouring communities heavily rely on the forest for their livelihood.

"Mabira Forest is huge, and we lack appropriate transport to execute our patrolling duties. We need motorcycles for movement within the forest. We are currently relying on one vehicle which is in dangerous mechanical condition," he said.

Musamali, however, said the greater part of the forest is still intact contrary to media reports.

Challenges

"We have administrative challenges like few staff because this huge forest is manned by only 38 staff who are beefed up by the environmental Police. Inadequate equipment like motorcycles is