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KAMPALA. An agro-forestry company has been accused of fraudulently acquiring about 19,000 acres of land and evicting hundreds of families from three villages in Bulambuli District, eastern Uganda.

It is alleged, in a petition to the Commission of Inquiry into Land Matters yesterday, that M/s Amore Investments Ltd in 2007 acquired 7,661 hectares (about 19,000 acres) of customarily-owned land in Bukhayaki, Bumufumi and Bunambutye villages.

The firm allegedly then proceeded to illegally obtain a 99-year lease from Sironko District Land Board, the parent district, without paying any premium rates as required by law. It, however, paid compensation to the customary owners.

Shs10.8b

Mortgage. Amore Investments Ltd in 2012 mortgaged the land to a Kenyan bank as collateral for a \$3m (Shs10.8b) loan.

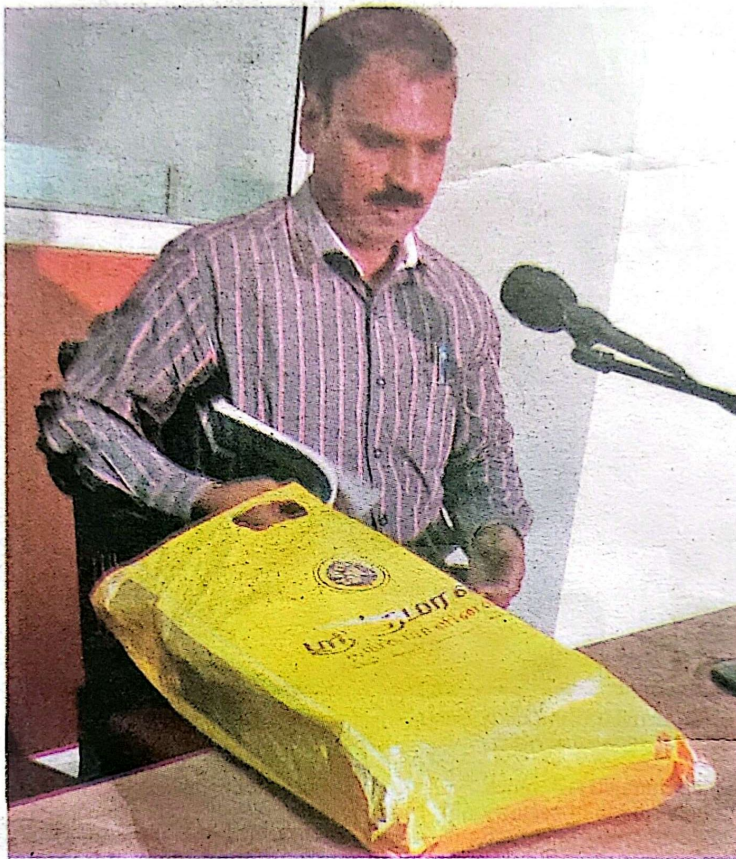
In the complaint to the Justice Catherine Bamugemereire-led Commission, M/s Amore Investments Ltd is accused of carrying out farming on the disputed land in contravention of the Investment Act that prohibits foreigners from engaging in small-scale agriculture.

Evidence

Evidence presented before the Commission shows that Amore Investments Ltd in 2012 mortgaged the land to a Kenyan bank as collateral for a \$3m (Shs10.8b) loan, putting the future of residents at stake.

Testifying before the Commission in Kampala yesterday, Mr Ramesh

Company accused of grabbing 19,000-acre land in Bulambuli



Questioned. The operations manager of Amore Investments Ltd, Mr Ramesh Kumar, appears before the land probe yesterday. PHOTO BY EPHRAIM KASOZI

Kumar, the company's operations manager, who was tasked to explain how they converted customary land into a leasehold admitted they

skipped some procedures and have no investment licence.

The Sironko District chairman and an unnamed councillor at the

“We paid more than 140 families Shs2.1b after the district approved the lease. The people were paid Shs120,000 per acre and we made efforts to get genuine land.” RAMESH KUMAR, COMPANY'S OPERATIONS MANAGER

time helped them identify the land, he said. “We paid more than 140 families Shs2.1b after the district approved the lease. The people were paid Shs120,000 per acre and we made efforts to get genuine land,” Mr Kumar said, adding that the company also paid for survey and titling of the land.

One resident claiming ownership of up to 1,300 acres has sued the firm for non-compensation.

Mr Kumar testified that although they did not do pre-purchase due diligence, the land was bushy and vacant.

His firm is planting trees and growing cereals as raw materials for sister companies, he said.

M/s Amore Investments Ltd is a sister company to Jinja-based Nile Plywood, Hoima Sugar Ltd and Tesco Industries Ltd that are separately embroiled in land disputes in Kiryandongo, Bugoma forest and Jinja.

A group of peasants from Bulambuli District accused their leaders of colluding with the foreign company to illegally acquire their land, the Commission's lead counsel, Mr Ebert Byenkya, said while explaining the basis of Mr Kumar's testimony.