Wildfires impede UEDCL operation in Acholi, Lango

The widespread practice of bush burning in northern Uganda is affecting UEDCL infrastructure.

BY TOBBIAS JOLLY OWINY

The Uganda Electricity Distribution Company Ltd (UEDCL), the country's electricity distributor, has embarked on a set of new approaches to fight an increasing trend of bush fires that have destroyed power distribution poles across northern Uganda.

UEDCL believes that the approaches, including mass radio messaging and engaging cultural chiefs to speak to and directly mobilise their communities to denounce bush burning, will salvage the situation.

Bush burning remains a widely practiced vice in the region by cattle-grazing communities to allow the growth of fresh pastures, hunting of wild animals and fruits, and farmland preparations, among others.

However, UEDCL now says it is shouldering huge costs to replace electricity poles since the fires are increasingly destroying electricity infrastructure.

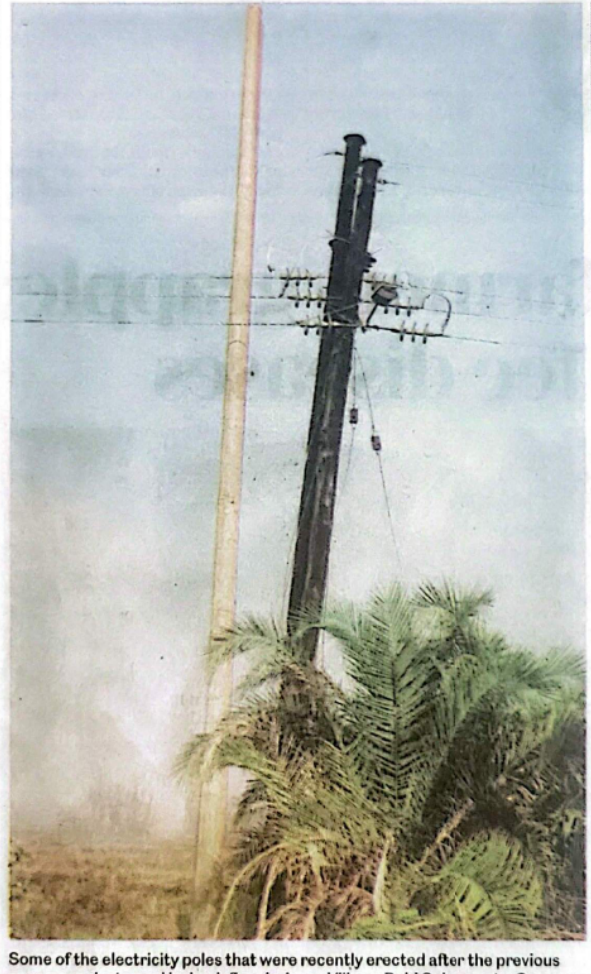
Between November 2024 and February 2026, UEDCL said several electricity distribution poles were destroyed due to the bush burning activities.

"In the last three weeks, we have lost 10 medium voltage electricity distribution poles, and the consequences have been dire to the local economies because of increased outage hours," Jonan Kiiza, the UEDCL head corporate and stakeholder affairs, explained in an interview last Friday.

Shs2m

This is the cost of replacing a single electricity pole, excluding man power, transport, and other costs.

Whereas bush burning is dominantly practised in northeast, northern, and West Nile regions, Kiiza said the practice has resulted in prolonged electricity outages to hundreds of UEDCL customers.



Some of the electricity poles that were recently erected after the previous ones were destroyed by bush fires in Awoo Village, Bobi Sub-county, Omoro District in February 2021. PHOTO/TOBBIAS JOLLY OWINY

EFFECTS

Whereas bush burning is dominantly practised in north-east, northern, and West Nile regions, Jonan Kiiza, the UEDCL head corporate and stakeholder affairs says the practice has resulted in prolonged electricity outages to hundreds of UEDCL customers. In Gulu City, it took 15 hours to restore power supply, affecting several businesses. On the other hand, UEDCL lost revenue worth Shs38m in that span of time.

"This year has been particularly bad for wildfires, which are quickly blazing out of control. The flames are devouring everything in their path. Particularly troubling are the lost crops, which are threatening food sustainability," he said.

He added that bush burning either totally burns the poles or weakens them, making them prone to falling once the rainy season sets in.

Kiiza observed that despite improved power supply in the region, it is still a challenge to maintain supply reliability in large parts of the northern and north-eastern regions of Uganda.

"Whereas, burning bushes is a social practice during the drought ahead of the planting season, it is illegal, dangerous, and affects the electricity distribution infrastructure," Kiiza said, adding, "It also causes loss of lives and compromises the reliability of power to the final consumers."

UEDCL is driving consensus on the impact of bush burning. As such, the utility company needs to engage these communities to educate them on the impacts of bush burning.

The Daily Monitor established that since February, UEDCL has been engaging cultural leaders in Acholi, Lango, and Madi sub-regions to spearhead community sensitisation against bush burning.

"This new round of community engagements is focusing on working through cultural institutions and spiritual leaders to influence behavioural change," he said.

At least 47 electricity poles have been burnt this season across Acholi and parts of Madi, including areas in Amuru, Adjumani, and Gulu City.

"The initiative kicked off in Acholi Sub-region, seeking to convince elders to sensitise local communities to protect electricity poles, which are very expensive to replace, Mr Paul Ssempiira Ssewava, the head of commercial and operations services at UEDCL, said.

He added that recent bush burning incidents within Gulu City, in places like Customs Corner, Bardege-Layibi Division, Gulu City, in which three electric poles were brought down, resulted in 1,600 connections being cut off.

"Replacing a single electricity pole costs between Shs1m and Shs2.5m, excluding man power, transport, and other costs. In Gulu, it took 15 hours to restore, with Shs38m in foregone revenue," he said.

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POWER POLES LOST

Previously, UEDCL introduced a new technology for installing fireproof fabrics around the poles in places prone to wildfires to help prevent them from burning.

However, Mr Kiiza said the initiative did not yield since the fabrics were vandalised.

He called on the public to watch over and report illegal bushfires to local authorities and the police.

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