



Government will resettle the landless in Sebei

Ruhakana Rugunda Resettlement

For many years, the question of landless people in Sebei sub-region has been unresolved, but now, government has come out with practical steps to solve it once and for all.

The origin of the problem

The problem of landless Benet community in Sebei Sub-region stems from the gazette-ment of Mt Elgon Forest Reserve in 1938 by the colonial government. Between 1938 and 1983, the Benet were allowed to continue living all over the forest reserve, however, their population and activities increased over the period of time affecting the forest reserve.

In 1983, government marked out 6,000 hectares from the forest reserve for the Benet permanent resettlement; thus banning them from roaming all-over the reserve. Government then assigned Kapchorwa District administration to handle the land allocation to the Benet community evicted from the forest reserve. The Kapchorwa District administration established a District Land Allocation Committee to distribute the land to the Benet community. However, the committee left out most of the Benet-Ndorobo people.

Instead, the committee allocated themselves, relatives and friends large chunks of the land that would otherwise have been for the Benet-Ndorobo people. During the 1983

land allocation, the committee exceeded the 6,000 hectares by 2,250 hectares, thus allocating 8,250 hectares.

In 1993, the Mt Elgon Forest Reserve was upgraded to Mt Elgon National Park. This came along with stringent rules/policies for conservation. In 2002, the 6,000 hectares was formally degazetted by an Act of Parliament, leaving out the 2,250 hectares. In 2011, communities in Sebei sub-region once again began pressuring government for further degazetment, this time targeting the part called 'The London Portion'.

The move to find a solution

Government after receiving petitions from the people, set up a technical inter-ministerial committee to assess the impact of degazettement of the, 'London Portion'. The committee began its work on March 21, 2011. The committee comprised; the National Environment Management Authority, the National Forest Authority, Uganda Wildlife Authority, Ministry of Water and Environment, Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities, district local governments and the Office of the Prime Minister.

The committee report noted that the Environmental Impact of Degazetting the London Portion would severely affect the fragile ecosystem of Mt Elgon National Park. The team

We will continue to consult and engage the leaders of the Benet community and other landless persons in the identification of suitable land within the highlands for their resettlement. Ultimately, the goal is to resettle our people, while at the same time, ensure that the Mt Elgon ecosystem is preserved...

realised the area was the main source (catchment area) of four major rivers namely; Siti, Kere, Kaplelep and Chepyakanyet, supplying water to lower Ngenge, some of the wetlands of Teso and the rivers contribute to the sustenance of Lake Kyoga.

De-gazettement of the London Portion, therefore, risked exposing the four rivers, hence drying up in the long run and affecting hundreds of people in lower Sebei and parts of Teso. Part of the London Portion is a soft wood plantation worth Shs45 billion at harvest time, which would be affected when settlements are established in the neighbourhood.

The technical team concluded that the London Portion is a very sensitive part of the Mt Elgon ecosystem serving as a catchment area for four rivers and several streams as well as being the source of two gravitational water