

Forest encroacher gets 43 land titles

Named. During the land probe yesterday, Mr Makuna Ssemakula was named among the encroachers on Nonve Central Forest Reserve.

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KAMPALA. A businessman in Wakiso is holding 43 titles for personal plots in a government forest reserve and has donated some 41 acres to the District Resident Commissioner (RDC) Ian Kyeeyune, the commission of inquiry into land matters heard yesterday.

Mr John Giribo, the statutory National Forestry Authority's manager in-charge of Lwamunda sector that covers Mpigi and Wakiso districts, named businessman Haruna Ssemakula among encroachers on Nonve Central Forest Reserve.

Other invaders, he told the commission, include Mustapha Musisi who owns 24 acres and John Mpaata Owegaga. Titles for the land owned by the latter could not be traced in central Land Registry records.

Mr Owegaga in October 2015, sued NFA staff for criminal trespass and malicious damage, a case pending determination, when they razed a structure he was erecting and attempted to evict him altogether.

In yesterday's hearing, witnesses said anywhere between 30 to 60 per cent of 14 central forest reserves in Wakiso District have been snapped up by encroachers for construction, agriculture, timber harvesting, sand-mining and institutional use.

Government agencies adversely named at the inquiry include the Special Forces Command, the National Medical Stores and the National Agricultural Research Organisation as well as the Uganda National Roads Authority that have taken substantial swathes for, among other things, establishing a training school, building offices and Entebbe-Kampala expressway.

The power of the alleged encroachers has crippled NFA from enforcing compliance and endangered the lives of its staff, the Authority's Lwamunda sector manager Mr Giribo told the commission led by Justice Catherine Bamugemereire.

"With the Marine Training School (run by the Special Forces), I had the initiative as a person in-charge to go and talk to the commandant. He referred me to top management and his commandant. I wrote a situational report to my supervisor for further management of which I have never got a feedback since 2015," he added.

Such impunity and resulting paralysis in decision-making by bureaucrats over fear of victimisation has, according to computations by the Environment ministry, resulted in encroachers destroying about 74 million acres of the country's forest cover over the past two decades.

The alleged culprits, according to NFA officials who testified yesterday, include senior government and security officials with wide-ranging powers and high-level political connections. In the Wakiso case, RDC Kyeeyune, for example, told the



Team. Chairperson of the commission of inquiry into land matters Justice Catherine Bamugemereire (right) and commissioner Mary Oduka Ochian conduct a probe on June 19, in Kampala. PHOTO STEPHEN MUKOBA

acres of Nonve Central Forest Reserve land as a gift from businessman Ssemakula, a relative, and that he sold it and pocketed Shs164m.

The RDC, who is a presidential appointee and chair of a district's security committee, said he was in a financial distress which he said was made worse by loans from commercial banks and the pressure on him to pay tuition for his children. As such, he said, the land donation came in handy for a relief.

"We will listen to all the complaints after which we shall verify the information to make recommendation to government to take action against the culprits,"

JUSTICE CATHERINE DAMUGEMEREIRE, HEAD OF PROBE

Wakiso District, which was carved out of Mpigi, belts Kampala and is part of the sprawling metropolis where an uptick in spatial development has dramatically increased demand and price of land, making fringe and protected spaces tempting for encroachers.

Some of the invaded forests in Wakiso District include Kalangalo, Kyewaga, Nalubaga, Lwaba, Kasozi, Ttumbi, Wakayembe, Gunda and Kajjansi.

Ms Pauline Nambi, a former NFA forest supervisor in-charge of seven forest reserves in Wakiso District, told the commission that she was using a motorcycle and, on occasions, walked to monitor the forest reserves and crack the whip on well-equipped encroachers.

"The major issue was mainly in Nonve central forest reserve of illegal land titles since 2014. When you are a forest supervisor, we work with communities who provide information and it was during a sensitisation meeting in Kakiri (Township in Wakiso District) that I found surveyors on Lwentama Road in 2014," she said as she framed the power contentions to attentive commissioners,

ors) what they were doing and they told me they were surveying their boss' land and I insisted that they were surveying a forest reserve."

Instead of stopping their illegal exercise, workers armed with machetes who accompanied the surveyors instead charged on NFA staff until police arrived to arrest them.

She filed a report on the incident to her superiors, who have done nothing to-date. The NFA team on the ground is thin, with one supervisor assisted by two unarmed patrolmen guarding up to seven central forest reserves.

Ms Nambi said they were further frustrated when police freed the suspects within a week and they went back to continue with the forest destruction.

"When I asked [the encroachers], they told me why I mind about their work. Now work was very difficult because we only had sticks and yet they were many and with pangas.

Invaded forests

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I again wrote back to the sector manager and, thereafter, there was deployment," she said.

Sitting at the National Information and Archiving Center in Kampala, the Bamugemereire commission is investigating into the law, processes and procedures in acquisition, administration, and management of land in the country.

"We will listen to all the complaints after which we shall verify the information to make recommendation to government to take action against the culprits," the judge said.

GIVEN



Innocent Kyeeyune said he only learned that the plot was part of a forest reserve after selling it to a one Vincent Kabunda whom NFA then stopped from developing it.

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