

Funding. Mr Nabaasa says government has earmarked Shs2 billion for protection of fragile water systems in the country.

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Nema cuts down forest to restore Rwizi catchment area

KIRUHURA/MBARARA. Environment watchdog, National Environmental Authority (Nema), and its partners have resurrected the campaign to restore critical catchment areas of River Rwizi.

River Rwizi has catchments in Mbarara, Isingiro, Isingiro, Buhweju, Kiruhura, Sheema and Rakai districts.

The river flows from the hilly terrain of Buhweju washing through the dry land belt of Mbarara and Rakai on its way to Lake Victoria.

It is the major source of water for domestic and industrial use, and farming.

The authority's officials have over the years been battling encroachers on Rwizi catchment areas and banks in vain.

The in-charge of fragile ecosystems for western region, Mr Herbert Nabaasa, says government has earmarked Shs2 billion to protect fragile water systems in the country.

"Every year, we shall be spending about Shs2 billion to protect fragile water systems in the country, of which Shs200 million will be spent on River Rwizi for the next five years," Mr Nabaasa said at the launch of restoration campaign last month.

He also delivered 20,000 tree seedlings which were planted around Lake Kakyera in Kiruhura District. River Rwizi goes through the lake.

More than 200 people are currently cultivating on the shores of lake but trees have been planted to create 100 meters buffer zone.

20,000

NUMBER OF TREE SEEDLINGS THAT HAVE BEEN DELIVERED IN KIRUHURA

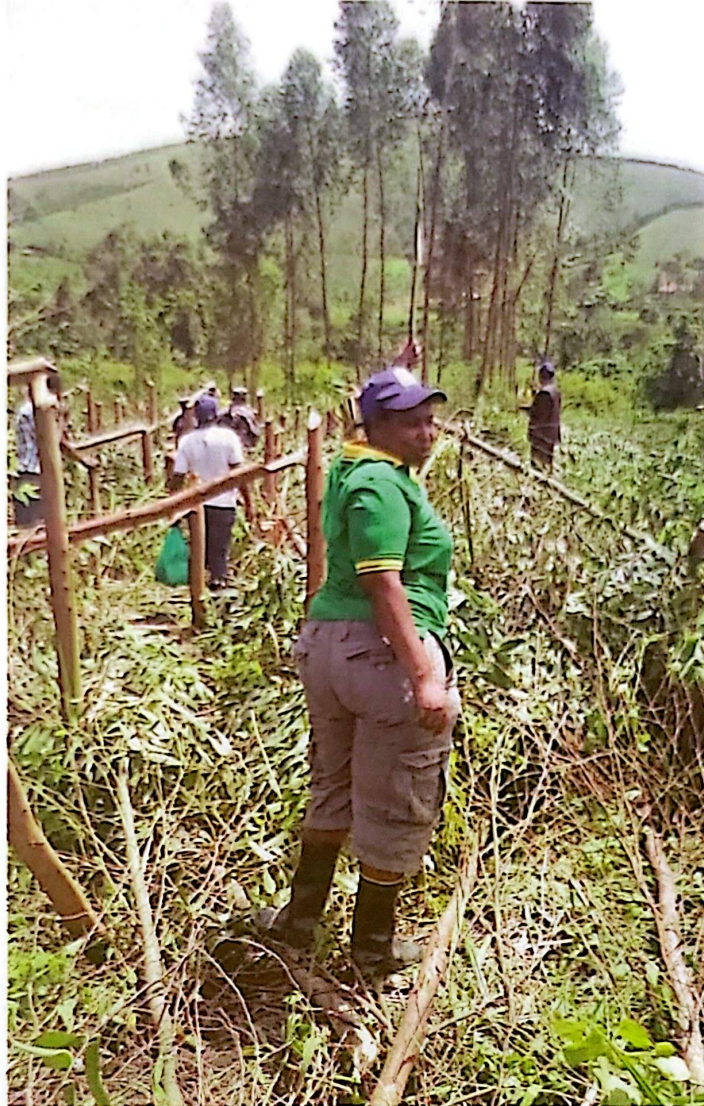
"The problem of climate change is a result of environmental degradation and the President directed that we restore fragile ecosystems in the country by sending away encroachers peacefully, through creating a buffer zone. We have started with Lake Kakyera," Mr Nabaasa said.

He added: "We plan to use an ecosystem approach to ensure sustainable compliance. We are evicting people through partnership. We are signing compliance agreements with them to ensure that when we plant trees, they will look after them and vacate when they have grown."

Limitations

Mr Nabaasa says farmers are barred from growing crops within 100 meters area from the lake to avoid degradation.

The Kiruhura District environmental officer, Ms Deborah Namara, said residents in the area cultivate in



At work. Officials from the National Environmental Authority cut down plantations and crops during a wetland restoration campaign in Kakiika Division, Mbarara Town on Monday. PHOTO BY RAJAB MUKOMBOZI



Encroached. Some of the settlements and gardens that have been established on River Rwizi catchment area. FILE PHOTO

wetlands because they receive less rainfall.

"Kiruhura is a dry area. Those

who want to grow crops encroach on wetlands because of their good soils. That is why they have invaded shores

of Lake Kakyera," Ms Namara said.

She, however, noted that political leaders do not support efforts to protect wetlands, saying this has affected policy implementation.

"We are still having a challenge of lack of political will to restore degraded natural resources. We call upon leaders to support us in conserving the environment," she said.

Mr Simon Ssenyana, 49, who cultivates on the shores of Lake Kakyera, said there are more than 250 farmers growing beans, maize, tomatoes, cabbage and water melon.

"There are about 250 farmers from various parts of the country such as Bushenyi, Mbarara, Masaka, Isingiro, Lyantonde, Rakai, Lwengo, and Buhweju who come here to grow crops. They come because of search

Voices

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HERBERT NABAASA
FRAGILE ECOSYSTEMS
IN CHARGE

"Kiruhura is a dry area. For people to grow crops, they encroach on wetlands because of their good soils. That is why they have invaded shores of Lake Kakyera,"

DEBORAH NAMARA,
KIRUHURA DISTRICT
ENVIRONMENTAL
OFFICER

"There are about 250 farmers from various parts of the country such as Bushenyi, Mbarara, Masaka, Isingiro, Lyantonde, Rakai, Lwengo, and Buhweju who come here to grow crops. They come because of search for water, and since they don't have arable land back home,"

SIMON SSENANYANA,
FARMER

for water, and besides they don't have arable land back home," Mr Ssenyana, who hails from Lwengo, said.

Active Citizens Uganda (ACU), supported by Nema and Environmental Protection Police on Monday destroyed gardens of tomatoes, potatoes, cabbages, beans, and cassava, sugarcane and banana plantations in Kakiika Division, Mbarara Municipality.

Mr Polly Muyambi, the chairperson of ACU, said they cannot sit and watch when the country is suffering environmental degradation consequences. "ACU is a self-funded entity of concerned Ugandans that has come out to supplement government efforts on restoration on wetlands. We have seen that government cannot do this alone that is why we are pooling resources to sensitise the public and facilitate restoration," Mr Muyambi said.

Mr Patrick Arinaitwe, the Mbarara wetlands Officer, said the ACU's intervention came in handy because the district resource envelope cannot facilitate them to restore of degraded wetlands.

"Our budget is only Shs7.8 million a year, this cannot do much, so the intervention of ACU is a big relief and hopefully if other non-governmental organisations come in, we can achieve 100 per cent restoration," Mr Arinaitwe said.

The environmental protection police officer in charge of South western region, Mr Ivan Makhone, said they are determined to support efforts of all environmental conservation entities.

"We are warning whoever goes back to carry out farming and other condemned activities in the restored wetlands. They will be arrested and prosecuted," said Mr Makhone.

The law

Section 36 of the National Environment Act provides for protection of wetlands and prohibiting any person from reclaiming, erecting or demolishing any structure that is fixed in, on, under or above any wetland.

And as a remedy for the encroachers who already settled in wetlands, Cabinet directed Nema, in 2014 to cancel more than 17,000 land titles acquired in wetland.

The cancellation has not yet kicked off with government compiling the list of the said titles.

Stopping encroachment has proved to be a hard call for the Nema and other agencies as they use the wetlands for planting crops such as cabbages, carrots, yams among others in order to earn the rural a living.

In the early 1950's the thick vegetation of papyrus and other wetland grasses around River Rwizi acted as water filters, catchment and regulated flooding in the area.

Today, the river, which drains its water into Lake Victoria, is almost lost.