

SALT MINERS HAVE TO WEAR CONDOMS AND THICK PADS TO PROTECT THEIR REPRODUCTIVE ORGANS

URA brings hope to Katwe salt miners

Kasere
By John Thawite

Salt workers at Katwe Salt Lake in Kasere district have every reason to smile after the Uganda Revenue Authority (URA) started donating gear to protect them from the lake's deadly brine.

The salt workers say they are disappointed that despite being involved in producing one of the most cherished food ingredients, other stakeholders have done little to come to their rescue.

They made the remarks at a function where the URA mid-western regional manager, John Kiyaga and the Kasere branch manager, Charity Nahabwe, handed over 50 gumboots and 50 overalls to the salt-mining community.

The salt workers, who include extractors, winners and traders, said they have been lacking protective gear, such as gloves, water-proof overalls, gumboots, spades and even health facilities that are necessary for their work.

Typically, women often have to stuff their private parts with cool cassava bread wrapped in cloth, while men wear condoms to protect their private parts from being eaten away by the deadly salt water.

"Much as URA is mandated to collect taxes from you, it is part of our corporate social responsibility to recognise your contribution by giving something back to you," Kiyaga said.

Nahabwe said the gumboots and overalls given out on Monday were part of bigger interventions yet to come.

The workers thanked URA for being among the few well-wishers who have intervened in their plight.

"We are fed up of people who frequent the place to photograph us as if we are tourist attractions. They keep promising to intervene in our plight, but never come back," one of the women salt workers, who only identified herself as Nyangoma, said.



A salt miner bares his ulcerated feet

Key source of salt
According to the Katwe-Kabatoro town council LC3 chairperson, Sulait Mabulu, the salt lake, the biggest source of crude salt for the Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania, Kenya, Rwanda and Southern Sudan, is located in Katwe-Kabatoro town council and is surrounded by Queen Elizabeth National Park.

For centuries now, thousands from near and far, have waded into the salt lake, searching for rock salt, for commercial and domestic consumption.

Hazards
The salt miners, especially the men work in the brine from dawn to dusk, immersed in one part of the lake, which contains the rock salt (mahonde) and is five feet deep.

Nyamwiza, 50, has educated her nine children thanks to the salt mining business. Photos by John Thawite

trying to eke a living from the trade, the lake's highly concentrated, corrosive saltwater has also been eating away at their bodies, often targeting the reproductive organs.

As Halima Nassaka, a salt trader-cum-guide at the salt lake explains, the salt workers have become victims of their own trade, suffering from dehydration and sores caused by the long hours they spend in the salty water.

"People who work in the salt lake are advised to drink at least eight litres of fresh water daily and some juice, but refrain from alcohol," she says.

Body deformation arising out

of contact with the corrosive mineral is another hazard.

"Gas sometimes penetrates women through their reproductive organs and irritates the uterus. They often complain of pain," she says.

Nassaka also says salt workers have to take extra care not to fall into the water because it kills fast, adding that the nearest hospital is Kagando, which is about 30km away.

"If you fall into the salt water, chances are that by the time you reach Kagando Hospital, it may be too late to save your life," she says.

According to Cosma Bikamiro, a salt loader, there have been instances of marital

misunderstandings among them because with time, some men are unable to meet their sexual needs after the highly corrosive salt water affects their genitals.

"We are forced wear several condoms sometimes covering the condoms with *kaveera* (polythene paper) and rubber bands," he says.

"This is particularly hard. How do you induce and maintain an erection to enable you fit the condom?" he asks.

According to 50-year-old Beatrice Nyamwiza, who has managed to educate nine children using hard-earned savings from the hazardous business, women are only allowed to work in the shallow parts of the salt pans.

"Even then, we have to pad our sex organs heavily, using cotton," she says.

Erosion threatens lake
Stretching about 12km in circumference, the black lake sits in a large oval-shaped crater, which is surrounded by hills that are becoming increasingly naked, as both man and cattle compete for the vegetation there.

The lake is fast becoming threatened as the vegetation that covered the surrounding hills has almost vanished.

Mabulu says the grass is a delicacy for cattle and goats, because it is salty.

"The owners of the salt pans have also destroyed the grass, which they cut to prevent their salt pans from run-off water," Mabulu says.

Uses of salt
"Mahonde is used as a catalyst in cooking beans, cassava and other hard food. It is also used as a cattle lick. The pharmaceutical industry uses it as raw material.

Projected revenue
According to the district town clerk, Godwin Bihanikire, the salt lake has about 800 salt ponds and employs salt traders, loaders, winners and extractors, from whom the urban council collects sh400m annually.