By Tom Gwebayangao

RELOCATING THE DEAD: WHEN NUCLEAR AMBITIONS CLASH WITH ANCESTRAL GRAVES

For eight months, families in 11 villages of Buyende district have faced a heart-wrenching dilemma: moving the bodies of their deceased loved ones out of the district.

The looming fear is that, if they delay, graves in ancestral lands may soon be exhumed, leaving them to shoulder costly transport and burial expenses.

Relocating the dead is no small burden. It affects everyone whether rich, middle-class, or low-income earners, highlighting the human cost of progress.

The challenge arises from a government plan to construct a nuclear power plant on Kasaato Hill, expected to generate 82,000 megawatts of power by 2027.

Last year, the energy ministry completed a comprehensive land assessment in the area, including houses, crops, livestock, sand mines, landing sites, stone quarries and even graves.

The assessment made it clear: any future developments may not be compensated, leaving residents anxious about the fate of their loved ones' resting places.

The affected villages, include Kasaato, Buyanja A and B, Budoba, Nawansaso, Kiwongoire, Kyankoole, Kiwantaama, Kiiga-Butayunjwa and Kiwagana.

Emma Kaseete, a resident of Buyanja A, knows the burden all too well. Last month, he lost his father and had to transport the body, along with mourners, over 100km to Buwuma village in Budondo sub-county, Jinja district, to bury him in the ancestral limbo.

"We spent over sh1m on transport and related expenses, including grave costs," Kaseete said. "This was done to avoid future disturbance," he said.

Catherine Nabirye, 35, a widow from Nawansaso village, faced a similar predicament. She was forced to buy a plot outside the "nuclear" area in Kidera sub-county to lay her husband to rest.

Emma Segujja Kabenge, the Buyende assistant resident commissioner and resident of Buyanja A, recounted relocating his 90-year-old father to the family graveyard.

"We spent sh8m on the grave; however, it will not last because, anytime, the Government is taking over the 100-acre chunk," Kabenge said.

Michael Kanaku, Buyende LC5 chairperson, revealed the scale of the impact: "2,600 homesteads and nearly 32,500 people are affected. Anxiety and uncertainty have also taken a toll on local agriculture."

Many residents have scaled back or stopped planting perennial crops, fearing that ministry officials may arrive to enforce vacation orders.

"We no longer grow perennial crops. That alone has kept agriculture at bay," said Mathias Aribo Nyadundo, the Bukungu town council chairperson.

The reduced farm activity, he warned, could lead to hunger, with no clear timeline for compensation or relocation.

"We are yet to get feedback on the cost of our land, houses, and livestock farms," said Erisa Katumba, a resident of Buyanja Trading Centre A.

By September 2025, the energy ministry had completed phase one of the Resettlement Action Plan, assessing project affected persons and their properties.



Some of the residents from the affected villages attending a meeting organised by the energy minister about land acquisition by government on Kasaato Hill

MINISTRY REACTS

Patricia Litho, the energy ministry communications officer, urged residents to continue using their land, as ownership remains with them.

"Compensation is expected 'sometime' in the next financial year, meaning relocations may extend into early next year," she said, adding that the ministry plans a six-month grace period post-compensation to allow residents to clear out.

During the Resettlement Action Plan launch in 2024, nuclear specialist Denis Tongojo assured communities that compensation packages would be substantial and include livelihood support. The ministry pledged to transport project affected persons and their property to new homes.



Litho

OTHERS AFFECTED

Beyond residents, the nuclear site hosts four primary schools, a secondary school, Buyanja Health Centre III, Kasaato landing site, four trading centres, 10 churches, 50 sand mines, stone quarries and numerous farms and livestock.

Isaac Semyalo, 52, from Butayunjwa village, said: "I was born here and my great-grandparents' limbo is here. Adjusting to a new district shall be a cumbersome process."

Aaron Gwolaba, the director of Brian Trust High School, Buyanja, noted that while residents are ready to relocate, restrictions on purchasing land within Buyende further complicate their lives.

WHY NUCLEAR?

Uganda currently generates 1,200 megawatts of power. The Kasaato nuclear plant, expected to produce 82,000 megawatts, aims to address chronic power shortages. Another site in Nakasongola district, along with uranium-rich deposits in Mubende, Kiruhura and Lamwo districts, position Uganda as a likely nuclear energy producer by 2031.

In 2014, the Sustainable Management of Mineral Resources project mapped Uganda's mineral deposits, including uranium.

Peak power demand is growing at 15% annually, with the National Development Plan projecting 22.7% growth in the near future, driven by expanding industrial and urban centres.

Currently, 80% of Ugandans still rely on kerosene, charcoal and wood for heating and lighting. Existing generation capacity cannot support emerging heavy industries. Nuclear energy, alongside other sources, is essential for achieving 52,000 megawatts and 3,668 kWh per capita electricity consumption by 2040.

Government plans to develop at least 24,000 megawatts of nuclear energy in phases, making the relocation of Buyende residents a difficult, but a necessary step toward Uganda's energy future.

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