Nametsi landslide survivors living in limbo, 16 years later

Survivors say they continue to live in fear, especially during the rainy season, as parts of the land keeps breaking off, leaving visible cracks in the soil.

BY FRED WAMBEDE & ANDREW WABUSHENDA

Sixteen years after a deadly landslide struck Nametsi Parish in Bundesi Sub-county, Bududa District, survivors and families who lost loved ones are still battling painful memories. Many continue to live in landslide-prone areas with limited access to essential services.

Every March 1, people from Bududa and surrounding areas gather at Nametsi to commemorate the more than 320 people who died and the hundreds displaced by the 2010 landslide.

A symbolic tombstone and a large cross have been erected at the site, signifying its sacredness, especially for families who lost loved ones.

When *Daily Monitor* visited the site last week, locals had trekked from their homes to pray for the souls of the departed and seek blessings.

Mr Hosea Wakwoba, who lost three children and his wife in the tragedy, as well as his brother, his brother's wife and their six children, says the pain and memories have never faded.

"On Monday morning, March 1, 2010, there was light rain when a neighbour came calling me, urging me to repent and get saved. I replied, 'Get saved? Which person have I killed?' Shortly after that conversation, I heard a loud, thunderous sound, and the soil started sliding down the slope. The mud covered my house. I managed to roll away and survived, even though my house was buried and my wife and three children did not survive," he says.

300 FAMILIES RESETTLED IN 2013

After the tragedy, Mr Wakwoba was among the survivors selected for resettlement in Kiryandongo District, but he declined.

"I refused to go to Kiryandongo because I feared how I would survive in a new area, especially since my arm was injured during the landslide. So I decided to remain here in Nametsi," he says.

Mr Wakwoba says the area has remained largely isolated since the 2010 landslide, which destroyed Nametsi Health Centre III and led to the closure of schools such as Tunatsi and Nametsi primary schools.

Following the disaster, the government closed the two schools and declared the area unsafe for settlement.

"In this situation, we wait for our children to reach 12 years and above so that they can manage to walk long distances to access education. Mothers are also carried on stretchers to access antenatal care," he adds.

Mr Fred Wanangutu, another landslide survivor, who also lost family members in the disaster, recalls the day as a morning of nightmares.

"Everyone carried their own loved ones for burial because nearly every household had lost someone. I personally buried six family members out of the eight in my home," he says.

Mr Wanangutu adds that some survivors who were relocated to Kiryan-



Some of the locals stand at a landslide site where the locals erected a tombstone and cross in memory of their loved ones who died in the Nametsi landslide in Bududa District in 2010. PHOTO/FRED WAMBEDE

ing conditions. Many have since settled again in their ancestral homes despite the risks.

"We continue to live under tough conditions, including poor transport networks. Children struggle to access education due to a lack of schools and health services," he says.

Residents are now urging the government to reopen the two schools that were closed after the landslide and to re-establish a health centre that was buried under the mud.

However, survivors say they continue to live in fear, especially during the rainy season, as parts of the land keeps breaking off, leaving visible cracks in the soil.

Kiryandongo fiasco

Grace Nakaasela, one of the survivors who was relocated to Kiryandongo District, says she spent 10 years there before deciding to return because of the harsh living conditions.

After the disaster, the government relocated 580 families, comprising more than 3,000 people, to Kiryandongo District. Each household was allocated 2.5 acres of land for resettlement. However, some families have since returned to Nametsi despite government warnings about recurring landslides and the high risk in the area.

Ms Nakaasela says the government should instead secure land within Bududa District where survivors can permanently resettle and rebuild their lives.

They argue that relocating them to distant areas has not worked, as many families have gradually returned to their ancestral homes despite the risks.

"The government relocated us well to Kiryandongo. When we reached there, they supported us for the first six months and allocated each family 2.5 acres of land. But after that, the support stopped," she says.

Ms Nakaasela explains that crop yields in Kiryandongo and Bulambuli dis-



Some of the survivors pray during a commemoration of those who died in the 2010 Nametsi landslides last Sunday. PHOTO/ANDREW WABUSHENDA

"In Bududa, we are used to growing beans, tomatoes, cabbage and onions, which we sell to pay school fees for our children. But in Kiryandongo and Bulambuli, the harvest is poor because of too much sunshine and harsh weather conditions," she says.

Mr Wilson Watila, a former Bududa District chairperson, says the government's relocation programme has not fully succeeded due to inadequate consultation with affected communities.

The government has been resettling households at high risk of landslides in the Elgon Sub-region to Bunambutye Sub-county in Bulambuli District, where it acquired about 2,800 acres of land in 2013.

Nearly 300 families, comprising more than 5,000 people, were resettled in the first phases and allocated constructed houses and two acres of land. However, leaders say the process has been slow.

"The relocation programme has not worked as expected because there has never been enough consultation to understand what the common person prefers as an alternative," Mr Watila says.

"The government decisions are often made without fully engaging the people they are meant to benefit," he adds.

RELEASED FUNDS

Last December, the Finance ministry released Shs50 billion to the Office of the Prime Minister.

Of this amount, Shs10 billion was meant for purchasing land and Shs40 billion for compensating survivors, with each expected to receive Shs10 million to build their own houses. However, neither the land purchase nor the compensation has yet been implemented.

Long-term policy

He notes that most resettlement efforts have been handled as emergency responses rather than through a well-structured, long-term policy.

"The government interventions have largely been reactive. There is no deliberate and comprehensive policy backed by a clear budget allocation specifically for disaster resettlement," he explains.

Mr Watila reveals that leaders previously proposed constructing houses near urban centres within the re-

mountainous areas to relocate to safer places while still accessing their farmland during the day.

Commemoration plan

During the commemoration, leaders pledged to begin constructing a church at the Nametsi landslide site.

The church is intended to serve as a permanent place of remembrance where the community can gather annually to honour the victims as they await the government's promised monument.

Mr Stephen Wabusani, the Member of Parliament-elect for Bushigai Constituency, says there is a strong need to preserve the site as a memorial ground.

He called on leaders to work together to ensure a monument is constructed.

"There is also a need to promote education in this area. It is painful that children wait until they are 12 years old to go to school because the nearest school is far away," Mr Wabusani says.

Mr Geoffrey Natubu Wafukhulu, the LC5 chairperson-elect for Bududa, says restoring essential services in the area will require consultations to determine whether Nametsi is safe for settlement.

He suggests that if the site is considered too risky, schools should instead be constructed in neighbouring parishes.

"If we cannot have a school in Nametsi, we can build one in a neighbouring village or parish to accommodate pupils. Children cannot walk 10 kilometres from Nametsi to access education, yet education is key to transforming this area," Mr Natubu says.

He also says it is unfortunate that some survivors relocated to the Bunambutye resettlement camp two years ago are still living in makeshift tents.

Funding dilemma

Last December, the Finance ministry released Shs50 billion to the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM). Of this amount, Shs10 billion was meant for purchasing land and Shs40 billion for compensating survivors, with each expected to receive Shs10 million to build their own houses. However, neither the land purchase nor the compensation has yet been implemented.

Ms Annette Nandutu, the LC5 chairperson for Bulambuli District, earlier explained that when the government released funds to support the resettlement of landslide survivors, the OPM and the district were tasked with identifying safe land for relocation instead of giving money directly to the affected people.

She says if the funds were handed over directly, some beneficiaries would misuse it and return to unsafe areas.

Ms Nandutu adds that due to ongoing land conflicts in Bulambuli District, the government has allegedly secured land in Kween District.

"The first step is to allocate land, followed by funds for house construction. Everything is now in the pipeline," Ms Nandutu says.

However, she notes that the land secured in Kween District is not enough to accommodate all the affected people.

"Those who have land disputes in Bulambuli have been given time to resolve their conflicts so that the remaining group of survivors can also be resettled

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