Why Lake Albert and River Nile resources have sparked conflicts

Conflict. There have been several reports of conflicts related to Lake Albert and River Nile over the years. Some of these conflicts cross borders. **Francis Mugerwa** explores the different reasons behind these conflicts.



Oil region. **An aerial view of land in the Albertine grabben where oil is being explored on the shores of Lake Albert. Oil exploration in the area has caused some diplomatic disputes in the area.** PHOTOS BY FRANCIS MUGERWA

John Muhangi, 34, a fisherman at Mbegu landing site set out to fish on December 23, 2017. He wanted fish for consumption and sale during the Christmas and New Year's festive season.

Armed with four guns, a group of suspected Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) operatives moving in three engine boats surrounded him, and other Ugandan fishermen, who were fishing in Lake Albert waters.

After accusing them of fishing in DRC waters, the Congolese reportedly confiscated five engines, two fishing boats and three fishing nets, and took them to Jo landing site in Bunia District in Ituri province in eastern DRC.

The fishing gear reportedly belonged to Mr John Muhangi, a fisherman at Mbegu landing site; Mr Ochakire, a fisherman from Kijangi landing site; Mr Oyen Bot and one Aduba who are fishermen at Kaiso landing site. It took the intervention of the Hoima district security committee having a dialogue with Ituri provincial officers to release the impounded fishing gear.

Such confiscation is a regular occurrence on Lake Albert, where conflict is raging between Uganda and DRC over a shared water resource that is also endowed with oil deposits.

Stephen Bagonza, 43, set out to fish at Nsonga landing site in Hoima District on September 16, 2017.

At about 4am, he was one of the Ugandan fishermen who were surrounded by an armed group dressed in military uniforms similar to those of Congolese soldiers.

"They confiscated our fishing gear, mobile phones, boat engines and fish worth millions of shillings. We were left in tears," says Bagonza, a father of three.

One, Omirambe, who attempted to resist was ordered to strip naked and was drowned, the Albertine regional police publicist Julius Hakiza said.

Abductions

Lake Albert, which sits along the Uganda- DRC border has over the years been a centre of fights between Ugandan and Congolese nationals, resulting into abductions and killings.

"My brother, Jimmy Bagamba and my uncle Patrick Tumusiime were abducted on the lake (Albert). They spent more than nine months in DRC prisons," says Immaculate Businge, a mother of three and resident of Kaiso village in Hoima District.

Their families lived in fear following the abduction by suspected Congolese soldiers.

Kaiso beach management unit members Jimmy Bagamba, Patrick Tumusiime, Richard Tinkamanyire; police constables Sylvester Opok and Stephen Kapere were patrolling the waters on May 26, 2013 when they were held over accusations that they were illegally sailing on DRC waters. The crew was kidnapped by suspected Congolese soldiers, who detained and moved them between Sabe, Bunya, Kisangani and Kinshasha military prisons.

"A month hardly passes minus (suspected) Congolese attacking and impounding fishing gear from our fishermen here," says Patrick Tumusiime, who out of fear abandoned fishing after his kidnap. Tumusiime and his colleagues were lucky to survive.

Before releasing the impounded gear or suspects, it is common for Congolese nationals to demand for a ransom, says Mr John Stephen Ekoom the Hoima Resident District commissioner (RDC), who chairs the district security committee.

Ekoomu said security officials have registered increasing cases of piracy on Lake Albert.

"We have realised that other people have made it a business since our people pay a fee to recover their confiscated property," Ekoom added.

Piracy and killings

Several cross-border meetings between Uganda and DRC officials have been held in attempt to resolve the piracy incidents. But the incidents keep reoccurring.

On May 21, 2016, armed men suspected to be DRC soldiers ambushed and shot dead four Ugandan Marine police on Lake Albert in Kibaale District, near the DRC border.

Sgt. Faruk Waiswa, Corporal Biral Opara, Constable Moses Ocen and Constable Bernard Isingoma were killed as they patrolled the Lake. A police speedboat and guns were confiscated by the attackers.

Uganda's foreign affairs state Minister Mr Okello Oryem, who se a protest note to the DRC embas in Kampala after the incident, sa Uganda had credible intelligen linking DRC's FARDC forces to t incident.

"A repeat of these incidents m compel the Uganda authorities take self-defence measures to prot its citizens," Oryem's May 23rd 2 protest reads in part.

Lake Albert waters lack physical boundary separat Uganda and DRC. Ugandan and fishermen repeatedly accuse other of disrespecting the bo while fishing.

In August 2007, a Cana