

THE MINES CONTRIBUTED ABOUT 30% OF UGANDA'S EXPORTS

By Samuel Amanyire

Overgrown pathways and silent machines greet visitors of Kasese municipality-based Kilembe Mines, the once-industrial heartbeat of Uganda. Production at the mines stopped in 1982 because of declining global copper prices, inflation and a lack of supplies.

Nostalgic memories are all that remain of the copper mining operation that once transformed Kasese into a thriving industrial hub, according to former mine workers and area community leaders. The mines are located on Mount Rwenzori foothills in the municipality's Bulemba division in Kilembe, where the mineral-rich ore is found.

The story begins in 1906 when Alessandro Roccati (1872-1928), a prominent Italian geologist, naturalist, and mineralogist, first documented copper mineralisation in the High Peaks of the Rwenzori Mountains during an expedition led by Prince Luigi Amedeo, the Duke of Abruzzi. Though Tanganyika Concessions Ltd began extensive exploration in 1926, it was Canadian ventures that

EX-EMPLOYEES, LEADERS RECOUNT KILEMBE MINES GLORY DAYS

unlocked Kilembe's potential. Ventures Ltd partnered with Frobisher Ltd in the 1940s, eventually incorporating Kilembe Mines Ltd as a private company in 1950, ushering in an era when commercial copper mining commenced in July 1950, with the added value of cobalt-rich ore.

Former Kilembe Mines Ltd managing director Fred Kyakonye reminisces about a time of "unprecedented prosperity." "Everyone in their position earned money that was sufficient to cater for their lives but also foster various developments in their respective families."

According to Kyakonye, the mine employed over 5,000 workers across skilled

What remains of the once powerful Kilembe mines



and semi-skilled positions, including geologists, engineers, managers, health workers, teachers and artisans, contributing about 30% to

Uganda's export earnings.

The company's vision extended beyond extraction. "That is how Kilembe mine hospital was constructed, supermarkets, schools, sports facilities and many other things introduced," Kyakonye says.

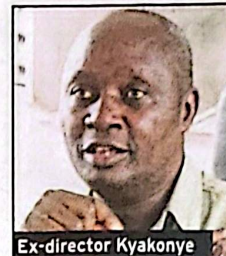
"Because of the high demand for social services and the need to ensure a comfortable stay of the mine workers, Kilembe Mines Ltd constructed residential houses for the various categories of its employees, ranging from first, middle and majority classes, hence developing an amazing industrial town compared to some in South Africa."

Jim Nyamutale, a senior engineer during the mining heydays, says: "I built a huge mansion for my people in the village, and I am still enjoying the fruits of educating my children."

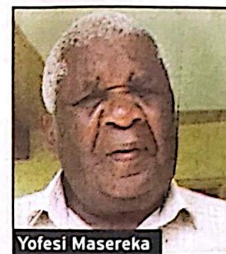
Yofesi Masereka, aka Richman, was among the first native Kasese residents to join the mines in 1953. As a foreman, he accumulated savings that launched his entrepreneurial journey by buying a Peugeot 403 pickup truck from Indians in Kampala. "I ventured into transporting fish from various landing sites on Kasese-based lakes to the entire district."

Despite his relatively short tenure at the mines, Masereka credits this foundation for his subsequent business success, saying many people benefited a lot from the mines.

Joyce Muhindo, 60, recalls the comprehensive welfare system: "Whenever someone fell sick, they used to receive high-level treatment at



Ex-director Kyakonye



Yofesi Masereka

Kilembe Mines Hospital free of charge since all workers were insured and entitled to free medication." She adds that electricity and water were free.

Kasese mayor Chance Kahindo credits the mine's railway line for the town's development: "People started several businesses and Kasese was among the first districts in Rwenzori region to get electricity."

However, the decline started in 1982, according to Eng. Edson Kambere, due to "a fall in copper prices on the world market, inflation and lack of essential spares."

Political tensions compounded technical challenges as most of the spare parts used to be imported from

Hope for revival

In 2013, the Government contracted Tibet Hima Mining Company Ltd (THMCO), a Chinese consortium, to revive copper and cobalt operations at Kilembe Mines. However, the Government terminated the agreement in 2017, alleging the company had failed to meet key obligations, including providing an exploration guarantee, paying annual concession fees, and ensuring participation by all consortium members.

However, on April 18, last year, Kilembe Mines Ltd officially handed over all assets and liabilities to the Uganda National Mining Company (UNMC), which has entrusted Sarai Group of Companies with revitalising operations.

The Sarai is spearheading a \$200m-\$250m rehabilitation of the Kilembe Copper Mines to extract valuable copper and cobalt, ultimately creating over 1,000 jobs for the local community.

National guidance state minister Godfrey Kabbyanga has, therefore, urged residents to position themselves in a strategic manner to seize the opportunities that will come.

South Africa, but because of the strained relations between the two countries, it was hard to access them.

What was once a workforce of over 5,000 dwindled to fewer than 100 caretakers maintaining the extensive infrastructure: Land, buildings, machinery, timber treatment plant, hydro-electric power plant, schools, hospital and recreation centres.

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