

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.

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.



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

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.

Ekoom 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 sent a protest note to the DRC embassy in Kampala after the incident, said Uganda had credible intelligence linking DRC's FARDC forces to the incident.

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

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

In August 2007, a Cana