

# More than 15,000 people face eviction from Guramwa Forest

**Composition.** Most of the settlers in the once forest reserve, are those who migrated from the districts of Kabale, Kisoro and Kanungu.

## Voices

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"As you can see, I have been here for over 20 years. Where do these people want me to go with my family? We thought court had settled everything and allowed us to continue doing our work. Government should allow us to settle and may be consider the original small size of the reserve not the vast area," MR JOSEPH MUGAMBAGYE, A RESIDENT

"High Court ruled in our favour and we had only remained with giving them eviction notice. One of such notices is putting announcements," MS JULIET MUBBI, NFA PUBLIC RELATIONS OFFICER

**KAKUMIRO:** National Forestry Authority (NFA) has ordered hundreds of people who settled on Guramwa Forest Reserve in Kakumiro District to vacate with immediate effect before government forcefully evicts them.

The forest reserve, which was heavily depleted by residents for settlement, crop and animal production covers several villages of Butenja, Galiraya, Karangara, Nyamwegabira, Kabarungyi, Mukaboda, and Muziranduru in Nkooko Sub-county.

Most of the settlers in the once forest reserve, are those who migrated from south-Western Uganda Districts of Kabale, Kisoro and Kanungu. Others say they migrated from Rwanda.

Since the early 1990s, the ever increasing number of people, currently estimated to be about 15,000, has been occupying the Guramwa Forest Reserve.

Mr Joseph Mugambagye, a father of eight children and resident of Karangara Village, which is entirely in a forest reserve, says he has been staying on "his" land since 1996.

He expresses shock that nobody has ever consulted him about the pending eviction, apart

from hearing announcements on radio, notifying residents about pending evictions.

Ms Jeneransi Muhawimaana, another resident, says she bought her piece of land in Mukaboda Village after migrating from Rwanda in 2008 but little did she know that it was in an area once gazzetted as a forest reserve.

"I just heard my neighbours telling me that we are supposed to leave this village and go somewhere very far. I bought this land and I never found a forest here. Why are they telling me to leave? Where do they want me to go with my children?" Mr Muhawimaana wonders.

These are just a few residents representing others with similar concerns in the village.

Mr Wilson Kyamuhondeire, the former Kabale District forest officer, says the woes surrounding the Guramwa Forest Reserve and the encroachers date way back in 2002 when the then Kibaale District sued the encroachers in a bid to have them evicted for the sake of protecting the forest reserve which is currently nearly 100 per cent degraded.

During a court session on October 28, 2002, court ruled that the sued people were not in the said forest reserve, adding that the original gazzetted Guramwa Forest Reserve was only 220 hectares, according to 1932 surveying records of the colonial government.

Court also found that the forest

reserve was about 1,546 hectares which had been encroached on.

Following an appeal by NFA, the then Masindi High Court Judge Justice Simon Mugenyi Byabakama, overruled the lower court on grounds that it was an illegality for the Grade Two Magistrate to order government to open boundaries for the 220 acres of land knowing it was a forest reserve.

The NFA public relations officer, Ms Juliet Mubbi, says in

## KEY ISSUES

**Announcements.** In late December 2017, NFA started running several radio announcements on local radio stations in Kakumiro District, directing all people settling or carrying out activities within the depleted forest reserve to immediately vacate.

**Court order.** In early 2017, High Court in Kampala ordered NFA to re-open boundaries of all contested forest reserves in Kibaale, Kakumiro and Kagadi Districts.

**Petition.** The court's order followed a petition which was logged by a section of residents around Kangombe Central Forest Reserve in Kibaale District, who accused NFA of irregular boundary opening in which they lost big chunks of their land.

**Confusion.** In their petition, the affected residents asked court to compel NFA to reopen the boundaries and sort out the confusion.

The mostly depleted forest reserves in Kibaale are; Kangombe, Bujogoró, Kihaka, Ruzalre, Muzilizi, Nakuyazo and Guramwa, among others.

April 2017, High Court in Kampala gave NFA the green light to have the encroachers on this disputed forest reserve evicted.

The Kagadi Sector Forest Manager, Mr Boaz Basigirende, says he is well aware of all impending plans to have the defiant encroachers evicted by the NFA soon.

"As you are aware the Guramwa Forest Reserve was encroached on and court pronounced itself that they are there illegally. That forest has to be restored for its natural purpose. When you lose a case in court, it means you have no ownership of the resource. They (encroachers) can just organise themselves and leave the forest voluntarily or wait to be evicted," he says.

## Protest

Bugangaizi East Constituency MP Onesmus Twinamasiko says he will protest against this impending eviction.

He says: "We are treating refugees from Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan and they are untouchables here. Why can't they allow fellow Ugandans to at least keep occupying where they are?"

Nkooko Sub-county LC3 chairperson, Mr Hassan Musafiri, says he is yet to receive any information about the matter.

According to the 2016 state of Uganda's forestry report by the Ministry of Water and Environment, the country has been losing an average of 122,028 hectares per year of forest cover from 1990 to 2015. The greatest loss in the country is estimated at 256,151 hectares of forests annually according to NFA estimates for a period 2005-2010.

Between 2005 and 2015, forest plantations increased to 37,000 hectares on private land and 64,000 hectares in central forest reserves.