

KIKUUBE

By Wilson Asimwe

The Government is set to kick-start the demarcation of Bugoma forest's boundaries with pillars so as to protect it from encroachment and destruction.

Lands minister Judith Nabakooba said on Monday while meeting stakeholders at Kikuube district headquarters that the exercise, to be carried out jointly with security agencies and the environment ministry, will last 10 days.

Nabakooba said no fresh opening of the forest boundaries will be conducted because the surveyors from the lands ministry concluded the exercise in 2023.

"This exercise is about protecting citizens from being misled into settling on the contested land for political convenience. I want to call on all local leaders to resist the temptation of politicising this exercise. Short-term political popularity must not override long-term environmental security," Nabakooba said.

The minister said the stakeholders had resolved that the pillars be planted and all those with grievances bring them after the exercise.

"In 2023, surveyors from the ministry of lands conducted the boundary opening exercise using the official map, which is in the custody of the Government. There is a report that was submitted; we are only going to plant the pillars within 10 days," she said.

STATUS OF LAND CLAIMANTS

She said when they opened the boundaries, they discovered that over 21 claimants were within the forest reserve.

"In implementing the cabinet directive, the ministry of lands, working with the Ministry of Water and Environment and the National Forestry Authority (NFA), conducted a comprehensive boundary opening survey. The survey report, dated 30th November 2023, revealed 21 claimants to land within around the gazetted area, with the total claim amounting to 14,933.8ha, which is approximately 36% of the gazetted area of the central forest reserve," the lands minister said.

She said the findings of the boundary opening established that only two claimants, Hoima Sugar Limited and MZ Agencies, were located outside the central reserve.

Nabakooba said Bugoma Central Forest Reserve was first gazetted with an area of 35,840ha. The area was further increased to 43,520ha in 1944, and is currently gazetted with an area of 41,144ha.

PHOTO BY WILSON ASIMWE



Front row: Minister Nabakooba (sixth-left), minister Mugasa (fifth-left), Maj. Gen. Rwakitarate (fourth-left) with security officers and technical teams from the lands and environment ministries at Kikuube district headquarters on Monday

# Govt to mark Bugoma forest boundaries, says Nabakooba

## GOVERNMENT WARNS ENCROACHERS

Grace Mary Mugasa, the public service state minister, said there was a need for collaborative efforts from all stakeholders in ensuring that they protect the forest reserve.

Mugasa asked all those who have illegally entered the forest to voluntarily leave it because they will face arrest.

"When you take a walk around Bugoma, you will realise that the whole forest is being depleted and it has been encroached on, and as the Government, we are calling on stakeholders to join hands and protect our forest.

"We need to restore sanity in Bugoma, and we have been appealing to all those who entered the forest to leave," Nabakooba said.

Maj. Gen. Moses Rwakitarate, the co-ordinator of the national vital assets and strategic installations, said the move by the Government to plant boundary pillars will help security agencies to monitor the forest and deter encroachers.

"Some people have been saying we are not present in the forest. This is a natural forest, an impenetrable forest. We cannot have the Government

present because there is no accommodation, there are no roads and there are no schools; it is a forest. So, it's supposed to be preserved as it is, but these people have taken advantage of that," Rwakitarate said.

He asked all those people with maize gardens around the forest to halt planting until the exercise of planting the pillars is completed.

"I know the planting season is in a week or so. Let them not plant, but those who have can harvest. But no people should open gardens now until that exercise is over, and then they'll be free to plant," Rwakitarate said.

Godwin Angalia, the resident district commissioner of Kikuube district, warned individuals currently growing maize or conducting any other activities within the forest without authorisation to vacate it immediately or face arrest once the demarcation is completed.

"There has been a lot of maize growing there. No one has a document to support them growing maize there, so they all have to leave, or else, get arrested once the demarcation is done," Angalia said.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF FOREST

"Bugoma forest is not just trees, but it is vital for water catchment for rivers such as Rivers Nguse, Rwemiseke, and Itoha that drain into Lake Albert. It supports biodiversity and regulates climate and sustains livelihoods in Kyangwali, Kabwoya, Kiziranfumbi, Kabaale and Buseruka," Nabakooba said.

"So, when we talk about Bugoma, we are talking about water security, agriculture, fishing and all other activities, including the oil activities. Bugoma is important not only to us but also to the future generations," she said.

The minister said over the years, families have settled in the contested areas, investors have plained land and local

leaders have faced pressure from competing interests, and this situation has tested the credibility of institutions and strained relationships between the citizens and the Government of Uganda.

## TREE REPLANTING PLAN

Following the boundary demarcation, the NFA plans to embark on tree replanting,

particularly in areas that have been depleted due to felling, farming and other illegal activities.

Emmanuel Bisemeza, the LC3 chairperson of Kyangwali sub-county, said several residents were living in fear after unidentified people started surveying land in the area.

"We have seen some surveyors in our sub-county serving both public and private land in our area without involvement of the leadership. We have reported the matter to higher authorities for management," Bisemeza said.

## BUNYORO-KITARA KINGDOM CONCERNS

Bunyoro-Kitara kingdom officials have raised a red flag following the destruction of key cultural sites located in the Bugoma Central Forest Reserve in Kikuube district.

The kingdom authorities, together with conservationists and community members settling adjacent to the forest reserve, say critical cultural sites — located in the forest reserve — have been depleted.

There are more than 30 crucial cultural sites situated in Bugoma Central Forest Reserve. Some of the cultural sites include Mwangaizima Nyamas, the Omukama Nyamatukura Musuga Kyebambe III's palace, Kamugamba wells and Ensa zakateboha. The king of the Bunyoro-Kitara kingdom visits these cultural sites to

perform rituals.

During a visit by the kingdom officials — headed by the chief prince (*Okwin*) Fred Rucunya Mugenyi — to some of the cultural sites inside the Bugoma Central Forest Reserve, it was discovered that there was massive destruction of cultural sites and other parts of the forest due to the ongoing land use, allegedly by Hoima Sugar Limited, and the illegal activities.

The officials faulted Hoima Sugar Limited for expanding their boundary beyond the leased areas and encroaching on traditional and ecologically sensitive zones.

Mugenyi accused Hoima Sugar Limited of violating the lease agreement by failing to preserve the cultural sites that are very crucial in the history of the kingdom. He vowed to take legal action against the company for the destruction of the cultural sites.

In 2016, the Bunyoro-Kitara kingdom leased 22 sq.miles of the said forest land to Hoima Sugar Limited.

The sugar factory leased close to 22 sq.miles of the contested Bugoma Central Forest Reserve land from the Bunyoro-Kitara kingdom for sugarcane growing for 99 years.

However, the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) found 13 of the 22 sq.miles unfit for a sugar plantation and recommended their preservation since it's a wetland and forest reserve.

As a result, NEMA allowed Hoima Sugar Limited's factory to cultivate sugarcane on the remaining 9.24 sq.mile; covering the grassland establish an urban centre on 1.26 sq.miles, establish an ecotourism centre on 1.9 sq.miles and restore 3.1 sq.miles of the forest reserve