

Police blames district officials over failure to protect wetlands

MASINDI

By Agnes Nantambi

Police in Masindi have blamed district officials for abandoning cases relating to environmental degradation.

Sylus Besimbire, the officer in charge of Masindi district Police Station, said the Police gets disappointed when cases are reported, but when referred to courts of law for prosecution, no one turns up to follow up the cases.

"It is a big embarrassment on the side of the Police. It is unfortunate that when we present cases in courts, we lack sufficient evidence to sustain the file. We are mostly challenged with bricklayers, so we end up releasing the suspects. We need to work together to protect our environment," he said.

Besimbire, who was speaking during the Kiiha Catchment Management Committee (CMC) meeting in Masindi, said if all stakeholders in environmental conservation worked together, all the wetlands within the region would be saved.

The Kiiha watershed, which is part of the River Kafu, a sub-catchment in the Albertine region, lies in the Albert water management zone of the Ministry of Water and Environment in the directorate of water resources.

The watershed, which encompasses 397km² with a basin of 1,118sq.km, provides water for a number of people and businesses in western Uganda as well as environmental resources for sustaining livelihoods, agriculture, commerce and ecosystem services.

The CMC team headed by Jackson Kitamirike, is overseeing management of the catchments in the Albertine region on behalf of the water ministry. When they visited some of the areas, the team realised that all the trees planted as a restoration measure were being uprooted and 90% of the wetlands in the areas turned into gardens.

"This is a signal that all our wetlands are disappearing, and yet, the efforts to



The catchment management committee looking at how waragi distillers are killing wetlands of Kyamuqambe village in Masindi district. Photo by Agnes Nantambi

BETWEEN THE LINES

The Kiiha watershed encompasses 397km² with a basin of 1,118sq.km. It provides water to a number of people and businesses in western Uganda and is key for agriculture and the ecosystem.

restore them are being undermined. We have attempted to enforce some of the regulations, but people brewing waragi in the swamps have turned a deaf ear," Kitamirike said.

Badru Mugabi, the Masindi district LC5 councillor, proposed that Masindi and Hoima districts should come up with bylaws that empower civil society organisations to protect the environment.

Karid Kirungi the LC5 chairperson

of Hoima district, who is also the chairperson of Kiiha CMC, called for a joint operation to handle issues of environmental protection in the two districts.

The resident district commissioner of Hoima, John Stephen Ekom, called for the incorporation of the UPDF in environmental protection to help in evicting people from wetlands on top of sensitisation.

Albert Orijabo, the acting commissioner in charge of water resources in the water ministry, decried the increased distilling of waragi directly into the streams in wetlands.

Orijabo, however, advised local governments to desist from forceful eviction of encroachers, until the harvest period.

The Masindi RDC, Godfrey Nyakahuma, proposed a special force to handle environmental protection, saying the Police lacks the capacity to

man all the wetlands in the country.

He also called for facilitation of environmental officers at the districts to help them carry out the monitoring of different catchments.

Nyakahuma applauded the water ministry for the support to the local governments to implement the presidential directive of protecting the environment.

"We have a clear directive from President Yoweri Museveni to see that our wetlands are protected. It is our duty to see that all the encroachers are arrested and punished," he said.

He said climate change would not be mitigated in the country if the destruction of wetlands and forests continues.

The Masindi district forest officer, Anthony Akoko, observed that there was need to issue eviction notices to encroachers to avoid being challenged in courts of law.