



Stranded. Before their eviction, the miners had set up make-shift structures from tarpaulin, wood and aluminium sheets. The eviction rendered some of them homeless. PHOTOS BY FRANCIS MUGERWA

Miners struggling to move on after eviction from Mubende gold mines

Dashed hopes. Thousands of artisanal miners who have for years been engaged in gold mining business in Mubende were last month evicted by the security forces and, as Francis Mugerwa reports, desperation has set in as dreams are crushed.

Lawrence Mugisha, 30, was among those who on August 4, 2016 were evicted by the police and UPDF soldiers from artisanal gold mines located in the sub-counties of Kitumbi and Bukuya in Mubende District. The swoop affected an estimated 70,000 artisanal miners and landlords who had for years been engaged in gold trade.

Mr Mugisha had in 2012 been evicted from Kampala when Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) forced hawkers off the streets. After a year of distress in Kampala, a tip off by his friend about the gold mining in Mubende gave him hope for a better life.

"I started as a casual labourer. I later got money to open up a pit for myself. When I hit the gold vein, I teamed up with three other friends. We became millionaires," Mr Mugisha, whose ancestral home is in Mbarara, says.

Since 2013 to date, Mugisha says he had earned about Shs60m from the sale of gold from the mine in Kitumbi Sub-county.

The eviction was a blow to him and thousands of other miners who for years profited from unregulated gold mining in the gently raised rocky hills located about 170 kilometres west of Kampala.

Lujingi, Mukapya, Mukakade, Rubaali, Kamalenge, Kagaba, Kabuyimba, Kamusenene, Katuugo, Nfuka, Namulanda and Kigunda were among the sprawling mining sites that attracted people from far-flung areas of Uganda and abroad.

In the mines, the structures were mostly makeshift, roofed with blue and white tarpaulin. Some permanent houses had started to mushroom in areas code-named Kololo and Muyenga to mirror the upscale neighbourhoods of Kampala.

Stranded

Rose Kemigisa, 45, a widow, claims she has no place to go to after the eviction.

"My in-laws turned against me when my husband died in 2014. My only survival has been in mining," Ms Kemigisa, a mother of four who hails from Kyenjojo District, says.

She currently lives in Kitumbi trading centre, about five kilometres from the mines in the hope that one day she will be authorised to resume gold mining. Many other miners are hanging on in nearby trading centres awaiting government clearance to return to mining.

"My only survival was buying ore and

sieving out gold," says Mugabo Komuhendo, 41, a single mother of two who has set up a makeshift place of abode in Rwebituti trading centre.

"The earnings would enable me look after my children. The eviction has destroyed all my hopes and livelihood," Ms Komuhendo says.

"The eviction was a shock to us; it is unbelievable," says 36-year-old Fideri Mutungi, who built his first residential house in 2015 in Makokoto Sub-county in Mubende District using gold revenues.

Mr Mutungi, a father of three, has since the mines were raided, retreated to his home area where he is engaging in maize cultivation and hopes to resume mining one day when the government gives artisanal miners a green light.

Gold pits linked to civil servants, politicians, businessmen opened up over the years. The booming gold trade attracted prostitutes, suspected criminals, illegal immigrants, school children, the elderly, the unemployed, graduates and other energetic youth searching for a fortune.

The eviction

On the day the eviction was carried out, some mining equipment was impounded and more than 50 people

were arrested. Action Aid, a humanitarian NGO, offered helpless miners lawyers that secured their release on bail.

"The eviction was political and did not make economic sense. The secrecy and connivance ruling the natural resource sector will not enable the country to move into middle income status," Ms Winnie Ngabirwe, the Director of Global Rights Alert (GRA), a natural governance advocacy NGO operating in the mines, says.

She observed that Mubende District now has homeless people that risk turning into a security threat.

"Let the registration of all miners begin now with a clear roadmap shared and understood by all stakeholders," Ms Ngabirwe said.

She proposed the need to expedite the policy and legislative framework to ensure that artisanal miners are recognised and protected by the law.

Bukuya County MP Michael Bukenya says parliamentarians and other leaders in Mubende District are seeking audience with President Museveni to explain the repercussions of the eviction.

He says the mines had offered employment, business and vibrancy to his constituents.

"We shall continue advocating for the people because the licensed investors can coexist with the local miners," adds Bukuya County MP Michael Bukenya.

