

Issue. The commission of inquiry into land matters discovered that the entire forest has been destroyed under the watch of a forest supervisor and a patrol personnel.

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NFA bosses quizzed over razed Kajjansi forest

KAMPALA. National Forestry Authority (NFA) officials have been accused of failing to execute their mandate leading to destruction of 297 hectares of Kajjansi Central Forest Reserve in Wakiso District.

During a fact-finding tour of Kajjansi, the commission of inquiry into land matters was yesterday shocked to discover that the entire forest has since been destroyed under the watch of a forest supervisor, Mr Charles Ojandu, and a forest patrol personnel only identified as Aryema.

The team led by commissioner Mary Oduka Ochan also found that what used to be a forest in the peri-urban area had been levelled and reduced to a cattle grazing area, and dotted with ditches for brick laying as well as farmland.

The commission quizzed NFA executive director Michael Mugisa, legal manager Ruth Kisakye, and Mr Ojandu, tasking them to explain the circumstances under which the reserve was cleared without their consent.

"You were employed to ensure that the forest is not depleted but you failed to take action and instead colluded with the destroyers. Why did you allow felling of trees at a high rate, what procedure was followed?" Ms Ochan asked.

"We are surprised that a person is given a duty to protect a forest that is not there. Are you fit for the job? You are here to guide farmers on how to plant trees and protect them and instead you allowed illegal activities,"

she said. Evidence before the commission indicates that in 1997, the then forestry department leased the forest land to 26 private tree farmers and issued them with nontransferable permits.

But it is alleged that businessman Ephraim Ntaganda and his elder brother Cedric Songoza illegally graded the land and destroyed the entire forest claiming that the farmers had sold and transferred their rights to them. The two have since been quizzed before the commission, but have denied any wrongdoing. Dr Deziderio Kasujja, 79, a licensed tree planter, complained to the commission and accused the two brothers of destroying without compensation his 12-acre eucalyptus and 150 bee hives under the protection of armed security men in March 2016.

Mr Ojandu told the commission that the trees were harvested by the farmers and that the removal of tree stamps was done by Songoza to replant new trees.

"In August 2015, I received a call from Mr Songoza and we met at Kajjansi. He told me that he had dealt with Dr Kasujja and made agreement to sell him two acres which had been allocated to him for planting trees. I told him that the permits were non-transferable but I advised that it needs Kasujja to consent and write to top management," he explained.

"I got concerned and I called Kasujja about the issue but he denied any

dealings with Mr Songoza but what happened is that later, the farmers started harvesting trees at a high rate," he said.

On his part, Mr Mugisa, who was accused of failing in the management of forest reserves, told the commission that he only learnt of the destruction a year ago while attending a management meeting and deployed an enforcement team to eject them.

BACKGROUND

Involved. It is alleged that businessman Ephraim Ntaganda and his elder brother Cedric Songoza illegally graded the land and destroyed the entire forest claiming that the farmers had sold and transferred their rights to them. The two have since been quizzed before the commission, but have denied any wrongdoing.

"I never came to this area as alleged but I started getting information that the farmers transferred their interests, which is illegal. We are investigating the matter and we are waiting for a new board to be constituted to guide us and a police report because some people were arrested and given bond," he said. Asked to explain

whether forestry work is regulated, Mr Mugisa said the area has been problematic and that the 26 farmers have since disappeared.

At the scene, Mr Kasujja showed disputed agreements and accused Mr Ntaganda of being a liar.

"...and the agreement does not have a date. I did not have any problem with my agent and I have never called Ntaganda. Songoza came as a youth and asked me for space to work and he did not tell me about his brother (Ntaganda)," he said.

It is alleged that Mr Songoza acquired interests of the farmers on the entire land upon paying them and that Mr Kasujja was paid up to Shs70m.

But the commissioners observed that there was no evidence that money had exchanged hands in the purported agreements.

Kajjansi Forest Reserve is one of 14 forest reserves that have been destroyed in Wakiso District in violation of peoples' right to a clean and healthy environment.

Meanwhile, the commission has halted any activity on the disputed forest land until conclusion of its work.

The commission sitting at the National Information and Archives Centre in Kampala, is inquiring into the law, processes and procedures in land acquisition, land administration, and management in the country.