

Forestry authority staff fired over illegal logging

By Gerald Tenywa

A fresh shakeup of the National Forestry Authority (NFA) has left six officials of the top forestry body suspended and the services of three others terminated.

This follows allegations of aiding illegal loggers to cut down trees in natural forest reserves and absenteeism.

The executive director of the National Forestry Authority (NFA), Michael Mugisa, terminated from duty Araali Gonza, who has been working with the timber tracking unit of NFA.

Jimmy Okweny, hitherto a forest supervisor in Zirimiti in Mukono, has been removed from office over negligence and facilitating illegal activities in the forest reserves under his watch.

Robert Mugenyi, who has been in charge of a reserve in Moyo, was also fired over allegations of absenteeism.

By last evening, the suspended officials included Stephen Bagonza, the co-ordinator of the law enforcement team that checks illegal logging and recover illegally harvested timber.

George Gasana, the co-ordinator of plantations, remains out of office as investigators probe illegal timber harvests in Mafuga plantation in southwestern Uganda.

Francis Madrama, the sector manager for Kisindi sector in Bugoma and Paul Ochieng, a forest supervisor in Kidoma-Kizirafumbi, Bugoma were also suspended over illegal logging in Bugoma, Hoima district.

Others also on suspension are Margret Aharikundira, a sector manager in Matiri sector of Kyenjojo and William Bamusubire in Lendu plantations in West Nile region

Deny wrongdoing

Gonza, who was fired over allegations of facilitating illegal activities in Kashoha-Kitomi forest reserves, denied participating in illegal activities.

"How do you terminate someone



National Forestry Authority staff destroying illegally logged timber found in Bugoma Forest during an operation in October 2016. Photo by Roderick Ahimbazwe

over allegations? I have appealed to NFA's board of trustees and I hope to get a fair hearing and treatment," he said.

Gasana denied harvesting mahogany trees in Mafuga forest reserve in Kabala.

"I think some people are not happy with the way I have exposed those who have been grabbing land in Kajansi forest reserve and Namanve. They are now coming up with empty allegations. Can you imagine I am being accused of helping illegal activities, including the cutting down of mahogany in Mafuga. Mafuga is a plantation of pines; mahogany does not grow in Mafuga. I am ready for the disciplinary committee. I know the truth and I will stand for the truth," he said.

Madarama, who started working with NFA in 2006, was previously a sector manager at Zirimiti sector within Mabira Forest Reserve in Mukono. He was transferred to

BETWEEN THE LINES:

■ The acting spokesperson of the NFA cited misconduct, abating illegal activities, facilitation of illegal activities and absenteeism as some of the reasons why the officials were either suspended or fired.

Bugoma-Kisindi sector in October last year.

In December, reports that illegal loggers had infiltrated deep into the forest were picked up by higher authorities, who ordered Madrama to clean up the forest of illegal activities. However, the illegal logging continued, prompting investigations.

Efforts to reach out to Mugisa on his known mobile phone number were futile.

Julie Mubi, the acting spokesperson of the NFA,

confirmed that three NFA officials have been fired and investigations are underway and that administrative action will be taken.

"It is true, the executive director has fired three people after investigations and public hearing. The other six have been suspended either to pave the way for investigations or a public hearing in the coming weeks," Mubi said in a telephone interview.

She cited misconduct, abating illegal activities, facilitation of illegal activities and absenteeism as some of the reasons why the officials were either suspended or fired.

Last month, appearing before the commission of inquiry into land matters, Mugisa was grilled over the degradation of forest reserves. He cited land titles given by the Uganda Land Commission and district land boards in forest reserves among other challenges.