

Disappearing forests

SIZE **41**

Coverage. The initial coverage of Mt Kei Forest is 41 square kilometres extending from Yumbe District in Uganda to South Sudan.

Daily Monitor
TRUTH EVERY DAY
INVESTIGATION

Nearly empty. Despite several efforts by various agencies to stop the illegal logging of *Afzelia Africana*, a rare tree that is on the verge of extinction in Kei Forest, many people have continued with its trade. With this, the forest that was once a home to white rhinos and other wild life species is quickly losing its shine to loggers day and night.

Sudhir Byaruhanga delves into how the illegal logging is leading to Kei's depletion.

Gold is a precious metal buried underground. But in Yumbe District in West Nile, which is at the tip bordering South Sudan, there is a new-found gold standing above ground in a canopy of trees that dot Kei Forest.

The locals here call them golden trees because of the precious price they fetch in the far-flung Asian market. The African mahogany tree or *Afzelia Africana* is a rare tree that is on the verge of extinction.

It has durable wood and its treatment does not require preservatives. This makes it excellent wood for use in pleasure-crafts, especially keels, stems and panels, bridges as well as interior fittings.

Yet illicit logging is nearly depleting Kei Forest of this precious tree that produces the golden wood, leaving behind a desolate and barren land.

In February, the Ministry of Water and Environment suspended the cutting of these trees with immediate effect.

But the practice has continued unabated as the trade in logs has become increasingly lucrative.

Arua is a bustling town in West Nile. It is one of the fastest growing towns in Uganda and borders Yumbe District.

Because of its strategic location, near the DR Congo and South Sudan borders, it boasts enviable cross-border business.

A lot of timber products from Kei Forest are carted here. Fifty four kilometres from Arua in the north is Koboko town, facing the South Sudan border. The truckloads of timber are seen driven and offloaded at various shops in all these towns.

Most of it is harvested in Mt Kei Forest, once a natural expanse of 41 square kilometres extending from Yumbe in Uganda to South Sudan. We spent more than a week in Yumbe investigating the illegal log business which involves the local leaders and loggers.

On the first day, we set off from

Loggers take over Kei forest with impunity as authorities watch

MT KEI FOREST

Yumbe District. Where Mt Kei Forest is found. Illegal logging of *Afzelia Africana* trees is killing the natural 41sq. km expanse that stretches from Yumbe in Uganda into South Sudan.



Arua town to Yumbe at dawn. At Arapanga, a shabby outpost close to Mt Kei Forest, there was a truck that had been loaded with logs. There were also men transporting charcoal en-route to Yumbe town. Charcoal is another illegal activity threatening Mt Kei Forest.

Through narrow bumpy and muddy roads, we reached a log collection centre near abandoned grass-thatched huts. It's not clear whether the occupants deliberately left to create a safe haven for the log and timber dealers. The loggers pick logs from the forest using cranes and load them onto trucks. There are many cranes stationed in Kei town awaiting hiring for log and timber loading.

The next day our team left at 3am for a journey that would take us 300km to reach Kei forest.

In Koboko a trailer carrying logs lay stationary on the outskirts of the town. We later learnt that police had intercepted the truck at a road block following a dispute over the logs, but ordinarily the truck wouldn't have been intercepted, meaning police are part of the illegal log business.

Shs600,000

Penalty. The amount of money, a duo convicted last month for illegal logging in Arua District was asked to pay.

Along the way, we saw heavy trucks loaded with logs and charcoal navigated through this road. They are joined in the illicit trade by local charcoal burners who endure the punishing long distance to transport their merchandise on bicycles at night.

Kerwa is the last outpost towards the South Sudan border. Here there are dry African mahogany trees.

Our vehicle could not proceed beyond. We took a narrow path across the savannah grasslands, avoiding to leave foot marks which could be used by loggers armed with machetes to trace us. We were also told one person had been shot by South Sudan rebels about three days before in a nearby village. The fear for life and the mission to investigate illegal log and timber business connived to create raging anxiety.

Nevertheless we made our way into the deeper recesses of the forest following the roads used by log dealers. The level of forest destruction here is unimaginable. There is dead silence only interrupted by occasional hissing insect noise.

Suddenly, there was a rambling

sound of a powersaw about a kilometre away but it stopped as we got closer, probably the loggers had been tipped about our imminent arrival.

We waited for about three hours to avoid blundering into these the loggers whom we had been forewarned they are armed and violent. Later we chanced upon a collection spot for logs in the forest before they are carted off for sale. We also found herdsman who have encroached on the forest.

What is left

In the middle of the shrubs, a piece of timber lies in what looks like a former course of a stream that has since disappeared, probably due to climate change occasioned by deforestation.

There are barely any mature trees anymore. What remains of the former canopy of giant trees are branches of cut African mahogany tree.

The locals shared their experience on climate 20 years ago and today.

"We used to receive enough rain throughout the year and would plant in two seasons. These days we don't plant much during the first season.

This part of West Nile used to be a food basket for the entire northern Uganda, but these days we don't have enough food," said a 76-year-old man who only identified himself as Mzee.

This forest was also a sanctuary for the White Rhino established in 1938 in the 170 square mile Mt. Kei Forest Reserve to save endangered species.

However, today the White Rhino is no more having fallen to prey to poachers. The natural resource manager of the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA), Mr Francis Ogwal, revealed shocking statistics on illicit logging.

"The pearl of Africa is going to be the desert of Africa. By 1900 its forest cover was at 50 per cent, about 12.1 million hectares. In 1990 it had fallen to about 24 per cent, about 4.9 million hectares. It reduced by 2015, about 1.7 per cent. Now in 2018 it might be 1. per cent. When you look at that, the country is just getting bare and eye the little that is remaining, people are thinking that we should be exporting charcoal to Kenya," Mr Ogwal says.

In the middle of Kei Forest a people who have lived here for over 10 years.

"We have tried to evict them in the past and soon we shall carry out another exercise," Ogwal told *Da Monitor*. A stone-throw away from South Sudan border, the sound of power saw is heard again.

A logger had just split a mahogany tree which is almost extinct in forest. However we could not film logger to avoid detection by herdsman in the vicinity, which could endanger

ABOUT AFZELIA AFRICANA TREES



Location. *Afzelia Africana*, commonly known as "afzelia" or "beyo", is a reserved tree species in Uganda and only found in northern Uganda and West Nile sub-regions.

Market. There is a lucrative market for *Afzelia Africana* timber in Asian countries

where they are used for making furniture and crafts.

Ban. The dwindling population of the species has forced the Ministry of Environment to suspend any cutting, transportation and sale of the logs and products made from them.

Fine for felling tree Shs5m

Issue. "The pearl of Africa is going to be the desert of Africa. By 1900 its forest cover was at 50 per cent, about 12.1 million hectares. In 1990 it had fallen to about 24 per cent, about 4.9 million hectares. It reduced by 2015, about 1.9 per cent. Now in 2018 it might be 1.2 per cent. When you look at that, the country is just getting bare..." MR FRANCIS OGWAL, NEMA



ected. Mt Kei Forest that is facing depletion. PHOTOS BY SUHIR BYARUHANGA

requisition to the ministry before you take action. The loggers don't spend much time cutting trees."

The locals who stay near log collection centres are wary of the impact of forest destruction on their livelihood. "The big trees bring us rain, which helps our crops, but soon there might no rain in the area," said Abdul Saidi, a resident.

“The major problem is the bureaucracy. Resources are not at our disposal. When you get a message that there is an illegal activity happening, you are supposed to send a requisition to the ministry before you take action. The loggers don't spend much time cutting trees.”

MR SIMON PETER OKOSHI, DEPUTY COMMANDANT FOR ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION UNIT

One of the Local Council chairpersons when asked why they allow such illicit activities to continue, said: "They always come with letters which they say are orders from above." Sub-county leaders blamed the district leadership for influence-peddling and directly dealing in the logging business.

"I am not aware that people are cutting trees in Mt Kei Forest. Those cutting trees are getting them from their personal land," Yasin Taban, the Yumbe Local Council 5 chairperson, told the *Daily Monitor*.

Police and NFA officials said they are ill-equipped to drive more than 150km to arrest loggers in Kei yet it takes less than 10 minutes to put down a big tree.

Eight days later, we went to West Nile Range Management support offices in Arua to ask the officers why forest destruction has continued unabated. It is like they had been alerted. Upon our arrival, we were greeted by empty offices. Not even the receptionist was present.

We called the manager but his cellular phone was switched off. We had earlier contacted NFA head office in Kampala for an interview but we were denied.

However, the locals said it's futile to follow up the matter because Kei Forest fate is sealed. "It is too late to take any action because the trees are finished," said a resident who did not want to be named for fearing reprisals from log dealers.

About two months ago, a magistrate in Arua imposed a Shs600,000 penalty on two people convicted of illegal logging. But upon payment of a fine, they were released and resumed the illegal logging business is worth billions of shillings.

"The last time we had an operation in Gulu we confiscated logs and asked the culprits to pay Shs3m each. But you know the law sometimes says not exceeding Shs5m. So a magistrate will be at liberty to award a penalty of Shs100,000 to Shs1,000," Mr Okoshi said.



ation. A logger cuts a tree in Mt Kei Forest in Yumbe District last week.

ISSUES

No wildlife. Mt Kei forest, once a natural habitat for white rhinos and other animals, does not have any wildlife anymore. Not even a squirrel was seen in the forest for the seven days we stayed there. Even the birds have deserted for lack of tree cover.

Not spared. Shea-nut tree species have not been spared either. Loggers and charcoal burners target them for charcoal, food and oil.

The above notwithstanding, Mt Kei forest is near the area of conflict between South Sudan President Salva Kiir's army and the rebels and allied militias opposed to his regime.

Lawlessness. The lawlessness across the border could trigger a spillover and the bandits take over what remains of the forest.

Within the precincts of the police station lay logs that were recently impounded from trucks. The police are accused of arresting log dealers and releasing them without prosecuting them.

When asked why, the Deputy Commandant for Environmental Protection Unit, Mr Simon Peter Okoshi, said: "The major problem is the bureaucracy. Resources are not at our disposal. When you get a message that there is an illegal activity happening, you are supposed to send a

On our fifth day we moved to village. We were told loggers cut trees during day. Our guide led the target area and followed which became narrower the we went into the forest.

I hired my camera person Zirabamuzale with shrubs in his presence. But for 16 things of editorial value. We waited up to 10pm. We raided the place where we spend a night.

We went back to Arua to return the loggers kept away the they had been tipped about were also told by our

sources that some forest guards own power-saws, which they hire out to loggers. This information could not be independently verified.

We moved to try our luck elsewhere. We camouflaged with vegetation cover to avoid detection. An hour later, a logger started cutting a tree with a power-saw. It would take days for a team of strong men to cut this tree down without a power-saw.

NEMA blames this impunity on locals and failure by local government officials to enforce a ban on illegal logging.

"We take the blame but the way the law is written does not take away the mandate of local government officers. Because the districts are in a comfort

zone, every time there is a problem it's NEMA or NFA which take the blame. So wrong activities will take place as they are just watching," Ogwal said.

He said the recent pronouncement by President Museveni to take action against local government officials who connive with loggers could save forests if his directive is enforced.

We were told police, local government and some resident district commissioners connive to sell logs. We visited Kei Sub-county Police Station to interrogate these claims but the CIID officer, Mr Rashid Opio, said although many trucks carrying logs and timber pass near the station, police only intervenes when NFA officials ask for support.