

Departed Asians Custodian Board quizzed by Cosase

The board failed to offer comprehensive answers to questions of illegalities, mismanagement, and repossession queries.

BY ELIZABETH KAMURUNGI

Parliament has summoned the leadership of the Departed Asians Custodian Board, headed by the Minister for Finance, to explain the mess in the management of properties that belonged to expelled Asians.

Summonses for the top leadership came after the Executive Secretary of the Board, Mr William Bizibu Semakula, failed to offer comprehensive answers to questions of illegalities, mismanagement, and repossession.

This was when he appeared before the Committee on Commissions, Statutory Authorities, and State Enterprises (COSASE) on Monday to answer to lapses raised by the Auditor General.

"We resolved to invite the Board members before we get a way forward. The executive secretary was referring us to the Board, and he seems to just get instructions from the Board," Mr Bimali Mpindi, a member of the committee, said.

The board is mandated to manage and dispose of properties left behind after the 1972 expulsion.

The Committee wants the board to provide the full list of the properties under its management, valued properties, those reposessed and disposed of, and explain the concerns of mismanagement raised by the Auditor General.

Reports by the Office of the Auditor General of 2023, 2024, and 2025 have cited irregularities in the management and sale of properties that belonged to expelled nationals of Asian origin.

During the Monday meeting, members grilled board officials over the absence of a list of properties the board is



Members of Parliament of the Cosase and section of leaders of the Departed Asians Custodian Board during the Monday meeting. PHOTO/COURTESY

managing contrary to their mandate as laid down in the Assets of Departed Asians Act.

MPs also raised concerns that properties were distributed among the Board members, while others were given away by the Board leadership without following due process.

There are also claims that some properties were sold off using forged documents and false powers of attorney.

"The executive secretary gazetted the board properties and later said, but many of them are not ours," Mr Mpindi, MP for Persons with Disabilities, said.

"Are you aware that some people claimed that the powers of attorney you were using to give out properties were not theirs?" Mr Richard Ssebama, MP for Bukoto Central, questioned.

Questions of whether the board possesses the titles of the properties were not answered.

IRREGULARITIES

115 properties whose owners were compensated through the British High Commission and 87 properties whose owners were compensated through the UNHCR way back in 1999 are not yet sold by the Custodian Board.

Mr Semakula told parliamentarians that while they lacked a comprehensive list, they had made some progress on complying

"We can now patch up and have something to present," he said.

For more than half a century, the government has failed to resolve the matter of the properties left behind by Asians expelled by then-President Idi

Amin in 1972.

This has resulted in a loss of revenue for the government and protracted legal battles.

Inconsistent asset list

In 2023, the Auditor General's audit on the financial statements of the Departed Asian Property Custodian Board revealed that the Board did not have a comprehensive assets register of the properties, contrary to Section 2 of the Act.

The audit stipulated that the Finance minister shall keep a register of any property or businesses declared. The report further stated that some assets that had already been sold by the Board were still being treated as board property.

"The absence of a complete and comprehensive asset register makes it difficult for management to safeguard,

monitor, and keep track of its assets, exposing them to the risk of loss due to theft, wrong allocations, as well as grabbing, among others," The Audit report states.

One hundred and fifteen properties whose owners were compensated through the British High Commission, and 87 properties whose owners were compensated through the UNHCR in 1999 are not yet sold by the Board.

The valuation of these properties has been long overdue since management committed to expediting the same in 2017," it adds.

While there is no update on the inventory in the most recent report of 2025, it became clear that the board had not made any gains in gazetting the list.

Revenue losses

The Audit report for the 2023 found that the board has not been collecting rent from as far back as the mid-1990s from some of the ministries, departments, and agencies that occupy some of the buildings, with outstanding receivables totalling Shs2.83 billion.

Section 12 of the Assets of Departed Asians Act mandates the government to pay rent for any building occupied by a public officer or a member of the armed forces, prison service, or police force, or by any other person employed by the Government as part of his or her terms of service.

As of 2023, the Ministry of Defence and Veteran Affairs owed Shs949 million, the Ministry of Public Service Shs517 million, the Prisons Department Shs418 million, and the Ministry of Education and Sports Shs86 million.

The Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs and the President's Office owed Shs39m and Shs20m, respectively.

"Furthermore, there were no proper records to support the amounts in receivables. Under the circumstances, the probability of recovery of the amount is remote," the report noted.

The board is also under scrutiny for operating without costed-work plans and outputs.

The Auditor General's report reveals that for the year ending 2025, the board has continued to operate without a strategic plan, and is choking with suits. 137 cases arising from property-related disputes have been filed against the board, which is also under scrutiny for effecting payments without withholding tax as well as not remitting PAYE amounting to Shs381m.

This was deducted from employees' salaries but not remitted to Uganda Revenue Authority.

"We hope that the board will be able