

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 profiteered 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 Kemigisha, 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 Ngabiirwe 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 Bukenya, a medical doctor.

COMPLEXITIES IN LICENSING

Technicalities. Ms Irene Muloni, the Energy minister, said the government will regulate the gold industry in the area.

Information available to *Saturday Monitor* is that the artisanal miners had registered more than 10 associations, including cooperatives with government. For example, Mubende Gold Traders and Miners cooperative Society Ltd has a certificate No. P.5058/RCS issued to them on March 2, 2016 by the registrar of cooperatives Mr Joseph William Kitandwe. The licence is supposed to expire on March 2, 2018.

The cooperative also has a mineral dealer's licence No. 0424 which was issued on March 31st 2016 by the commissioner of Geological survey and mines department Mr Edwards Katto. On March 15, 2017, another mineral dealer's licence No. 0365 was issued to the cooperative. The license will expire on December 31st 2017.

Mubende Trust buyers and traders Cooperative has a certificate No. P.5798/RCS issued by the registrar of cooperatives on October 23, 2017.

"We used to extend loans to members basing on their (mining) machines and turnover (of gold) revenues. The eviction caused us a loss of over Shs300 million which we had advanced our members who have since been evicted," said Mr Saad Kajoba, the coordinator of the mines and chairman Mubende Trust Buyers and Traders Cooperative Supervisory Board.

Mr Mugisha's future hangs in the balance. "Keeping your master's golden bracelet doesn't make it yours. He (government) has reclaimed it," a covert security official said.

Revenue losses

The Auditor general's report dated December 31, 2015 addressed to the Speaker of Parliament on regulation, monitoring and promotion of the mining sector stated that whereas the mineral policy provided for formalising and regularising mining operations of Artisan and Small scale Miners (ASM) activities, the Directorate of Geological Surveys and Mines (DGSM) did not implement and enforce it.

It was observed that Non-Tax Revenue (NTR) outstanding as at September 30, 2015 totaled to Shs4.4b for the period July 2011 to September 2015.

The locals have for long been at loggerheads with Gemstone International and AUC, the two companies that have gold exploration licences in the area. The firms accuse the artisanal miners of encroaching on the areas licensed to the companies.

Dr Bukenya argues that the government should solve this by demarcating areas for the artisanal miners and the companies.

The eviction of miners came after repeated meetings and communications from senior government officials.

In a press statement issued on August 2, 2017, Dr Stephen Isabalija, then permanent secretary of the ministry of Energy, said the government had established a presence of an influx of people from neighbouring countries who are engaged in illegal mining in Kitumbi and Bukuya sub-counties.

Dr Isabalija said some of the people on site undertake highly mechanised mining operations using bull dozers to excavate gold ore and use sophisticated machines to crush and grind it.

"In order to address the above problems, (the) government is putting in place intervention measures whereby all the local artisans will be registered in all the mining areas of Kitumbi and Bukuya sub-counties so that they can be organised into groups that shall ultimately be regulated," Dr Isabalija said.

He said the intervention meant to reorganise mining activities in Mubende District would take three months.

In a letter dated June 28, 2017 addressed to Members of Parliament from Mubende District, President Museveni directed that those who invaded where the investor had made excavations must get out.

"The investor is there to help us to know whether there is gold and if so, how much of it. Why should anybody interfere with this?" President Museveni wrote to lawmakers from Mubende District.

Struggle for regulation

The constitution, in Article 244, vests the management of minerals in government on behalf of the citizens. However, to access the Mubende mines, the artisans would pay between Shs1m to Shs3m to local landlords. After hitting the gold vein, the landlord would be given one day in a week to mine or he would hire out his day to a person of his choice.

"We always invited (the) government to come and collect its taxes. It did not come. We wanted to be licensed so that we operate legally without any threats," says John Bosco Bukya, the spokesperson of the Ssingo Artisanal and Small scale Miners Association (SASMA).

SASMA applied to the Directorate of Survey and Mines for a location license in March this year but they have yet to get a response, Mr Bukya, a former candidate for the Kibaale District schair, says.

"We had hoped to receive a license and support from government so that we earn and pay taxes to contribute to national development," Mr Bukya adds. SASMA leaders met with Mubende District leaders in February this year to develop a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to

According to the minutes, the draft MoU would be submitted to the Solicitor General for advice before it is endorsed by district leaders.

As the miners hoped to be allowed to resume mining, they helplessly watched as graders escorted by heavily armed security personnel graded their former pits on August 25, 2017 in apparent preparation of activities of licensed mining firms in the area.

"The only hope for my people will be when President Museveni who cleared the eviction reverses his decision," Mr Patrick Nsamba, the Kassanda North MP in Mubende, says.

The current heavy presence of security operatives in the mines gives limited hope for the miners to re-access the sites any time soon.



MERCURY EFFECTS

Health implications. After extracting, sun drying and submerging the gold ore in water, the mostly bare handed miners would use mercury or cyanide to separate gold from the ores.

The miners would often suffer from skin rushes, abdominal pains, miscarriages and nails peeling off, says Robinah Kyakuhaire, a nurse who operated a private clinic and chaired female miners at Kampala mine.

Asked about possible side effects of exposure to mercury or cyanide by bare handed miners, Prof Anthony Mbonye, Uganda's acting Director General of health services said they risk suffering from blood poisoning and cancer. Medics have advised the miners to undergo cancer



Displaced. Miners vacating gold mines in Mubende during the eviction. The miners had settled in the area with their families.

