

# Rice farmers kicked out of wetlands

PALLISA

By Lawrence Okwakol

Rice farmers in Pallisa are grappling with adapting to a new economic activity after the authorities kicked them out of the wetlands.

John Watenyeli Nabende, the resident district commissioner (RDC) who led the team, said nobody should be returned to the gazetted area.

Watenyeli said they have carried out sensitisation on sustainable ways of cultivating in wetlands outside the buffer region, but people have instead encroached on all the swamps.

"I am not going to listen to any plea, it is best for everyone to vacate the wetlands to avoid arrest by the environmental Police. Bugisu is more densely populated than Pallisa, but their food is not harvested from wetlands. These people should also get other means of survival," Watenyeli said.

Watenyeli's team included Mohammed Samuka, the natural resource officer; Mohmmad Galya, the environment officer; Phillip Egosu, the district Operation Wealth Creation co-ordinator; Jude Martin Ajsu, the assistant chief administrative officer and his deputy, Sadiq Bategana.

The rice farmers are accused of degrading 295sq.km of wetland, but they are pleading for mercy.

Simon Akol, a resident of Okorikot village in Apopong sub-county, said the authorities should let them farm in the coming season because they have invested time and resources in preparing the gardens.

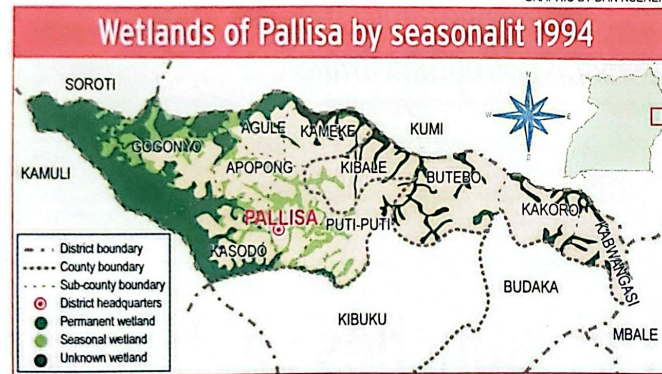
Sam Kirya of Goría village in Putiputi sub-county, who cultivates in Limoto wetland, said by chasing people from the swamps, the Police is going to register a high crime rate.

"I have 15 children with my two wives and we depend on growing rice for food, school



Those who planted rice beyond the buffer zone have been told not to bother weeding. Photo by Lawrence Okwakol

GRAPHIC BY DAN NSEREKO



fees and medical care. Where will I take my family when we are stopped from cultivating?" he asked.

However, Samuka said fish breeding areas on the banks of the lakes had been destroyed by rice farming.

He said human activities have greatly contributed to climatic changes, resulting in

drought. Forty per cent of the rainfall we get in Uganda is generated by our environment and 60% from the monsoon currents. But because of the destruction by people, we registered less than 20% and the Indian Ocean currents have also changed direction, leading to floods in Asia.

"We told the farmers growing

rice in major wetlands to cultivate 200m away from the buffer zone and 50m for those in the smaller swamps, but they have ignored the guidance," he said.

Galya said nearly all the wetlands have been turned into rice fields. Pallisa has a total land area of about 1,095sq.km, of which seasonal wetlands are

about 295sq.km.

"Our worry is that even the 66sq.km of permanent wetlands and 30sq.km of water bodies are also being massively degraded," Galya said.

Egosu said regardless of the excuses people are giving for encroaching on the wetlands, they are gifted with lakes and can turn to fish cage farming.

He said people invest over sh900,000 in half an acre of rice, which yields five bags that are sold at sh1.5m. However, if 20 people put their sh18m together, they can get a fish cage, whose capacity is 24,000 fish.

He said if the 24,000 fish are sold at a local market at sh8,000 per fish, after every six months, the group would get sh192m, making each of them sh9.6m.

"As the co-ordinator of Operation Wealth Creation, I am going to propose to the secretariat to embark on fish farming in Pallisa because the Government spent millions of money last season and nothing

## WHAT RESIDENTS SAY



**Faustine Weigulo**  
As a local leader, I do not mind whether I lose votes in the coming elections, but I support the RDC in chasing people from the wetlands because they now graze there.



**Joseph Odude**  
The Government should first provide a better way for us to support our families. Chasing us out of the swamps is not a solution. Ever since Pallisa was hit by famine, we have never received a single kilogramme of posho. How sure are we that the Government will give us aid after we leave the wetlands?"

was harvested," Egosu said.

Ajsu, who represented David Kawooya, the chief administrative officer, instructed the senior assistant secretaries to inform the district of whatever challenges they encounter.

"Politicians may undermine you in support of their voters being in swamps, but remind them that their people need a better environment and should use the wetlands sustainably by keeping off the buffer zone," Ajsu said.