

Conflict. At the centre of this fight are Kibuku County MP Herbert Kinobere and his predecessor Saleh Kamba, each accusing the other of instructing people to invade the wetland in exchange for votes.

BY PAUL TAJUBA
ptajuba@ug.nationmedia.com

KAMPALA. When two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers, the adage goes. And that is exactly what is happening at Limoto-Mpologoma wetland systems, in Kibuku District, eastern Uganda.

At the centre of this fight are Kibuku County MP Herbert Kinobere and his predecessor Saleh Kamba, each accusing the other of instructing people to invade the wetland in exchange for votes.

"Kamba is using the wetland issue to fight me politically. Can you imagine we were at a gathering (wedding) on January 7, and he told people that if he had been voted, people would be digging in the wetland freely," Mr Kinobere told this newspaper.

Mr Kinobere is battling to retain his seat in Parliament after Mr Tom Wairagala Kamba, reportedly a brother to Saleh Kamba, challenged his academic papers. Court is yet to decide on the matter.

But Kamba explained that despite his political interests in the constituency, he can never instruct people to invade the wetland, which approximately measures 35 kilometres and covers five districts.

2,000

THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE RECENTLY EVICTED FROM THE WETLAND BY NEMA

The wetland was home to different bird and reptile species, which have since disappeared.

Kamba on the defensive

"I know how important protecting the environment is. I can never instruct people to go into the wetland. Go on the ground and ask those people (encroachers) who told them to dig in Limoto," Kamba said.

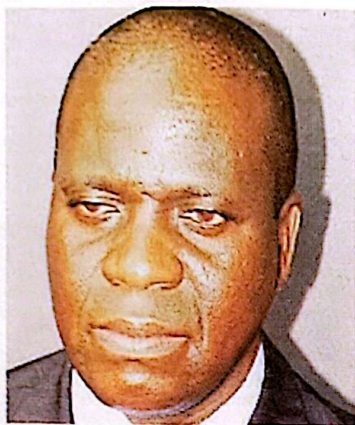
When asked to clarify on what he said at the wedding, he sent us a WhatsApp video where he told the gathering: "I know these days you have problems digging in wetlands, we know who has caused this problem and with time, we will sort it out," Kamba said in local dialect Lugwere to the cheering crowd.

And last week, the National Environment Management Authority (Nema) officials in

How politics has boxed Limoto-Mpologoma wetland into coma



Tour. Security personnel evict encroachers from Limoto-Mpologoma wetland last week. PHOTO BY PAUL TAJUBA



On the defensive, Saleh Kamba



Faults Nema, MP Herbert Kinobere

evicted at least 2,000 encroachers, mainly rice growers who had turned Limoto-Mpologoma wetland system into farmlands.

In a space of four years, the once fresh water oozing wetland has dried up and a small part of it relegated to dark messy sloshy soils. This has made it hard for many cattle keepers, like Gerald Kisale, to get water for their animals and the mudfish he once enjoyed has disappeared.

The wetland, according to Nema director of district support coordination and public education, Dr Daniel Babikwa, is a key catchment area for River Mpologoma that drains into Lake Kyoga.

Dr Babikwa said destroying the Limoto-Mpologoma wet-

land drying up of Lake Kyoga, a large shallow lake that gets its water from such wetlands and rivers.

"It is dry everywhere, the vegetation has dried up, people do not have water but it is unfortunate that leaders here are encouraging people to dig in the wetland," DR DANIEL BABIKWA, NEMA DIRECTOR, DISTRICT SUPPORT COORDINATION AND PUBLIC EDUCATION

Should the wetland completely disappear, the more than 300,000 people who depend on River Mpologoma directly will be at risk of not having water for domestic use but also for their animals.

But there is more to the wetland, according to Dr Babikwa. He says these natu-

cent of rainfall received in the area and any destruction on them means little or no rainfall.

The 60 per cent influence comes from Central Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean cooling or warming effects.

Also, wetlands provide various benefits to the surrounding community, including provision of water through recharging springs, boreholes, grass for thatching, pasture for animals, providing fish, climate modification, control of floods, water filter, among others. All these are at the verge of being completely lost given the current trend of degradation.

Limoto wetland stretches to five sub-counties of Kabweri, Kadamu, Kibuku, Rucoro and

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Dr Babikwa said Nema has been in the area since 2014, sensitising residents on the benefits of the wetlands and issuing restoration orders to degraders in the districts of Pallisa and Kibuku in order to protect the wetland system.

He said some 1,000 encroachers were convinced and voluntarily left but Mr Kinobere has instructed 2,000 not to leave.

Kinobere defended his decision and said: "My concern is that Nema has not involved

"We have politicians who are in for themselves but not in for the people," Mr Kadyama said.

"For us (politicians), we target politics, because those are our gardens, that's how we live," he added.

But as they go slow on encroachers to protect their individual interests, Kadyama is worried that a multi-billion irrigation scheme soon starting and supported by South Korean government will be at risk.

Government is starting a solar powered irrigation scheme to enable local people currently hunger-stricken due to prolonged drought to irrigate their crops instead of going into the wetlands.

us the new leaders. I also support evictions but they should be peaceful and people should be left to harvest their crops," Mr Kinobere said.

Kibuku LC5 chairperson, Charles Kadyama, said often times, political individual interests do not match those of the public good.

The law

Section 36 of the National Environment Act provides for protection of wetlands and prohibiting any person from reclaiming, erecting or demolishing any structure that is fixed in, on, under or above any wetland, which Nema officials said will follow and not be swayed away by

Encroachers arrested

During the Nema eviction, some encroachers were arrested. One of them, Edisa Munaaba begged for pardon, arguing that she was using the wetland to plant rice that will later be used to pay off debts she got during the Christmas season.

"I know what I was doing is wrong, we were warned but it is the only option for me to get money to pay off my debts," Munaaba said.

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