

Destruction of that wetland will cost you the life

Alarming. As Uganda joins the rest of the world to commemorate the World Wetlands Day, experts predict heavier calamities with the continued wetlands degradation in the country, writes Paul Tajuba.

Madina Nabakooza a 22-year-old woman lost her life in September 2014 in storm floods in Ndeeba, a Kampala suburb, shortly after an afternoon heavy downpour.

The following year in October, similar floods killed a seven-year-old girl in Ntinda, another Kampala suburb when floods submerged roads and vehicles, felled trees and flattened mud-and-wattle houses.

Again in 2016, a morning downpour swept a two-year-old in Elisa Zone in Kyebando suburb.

Floods of this magnitude are becoming a common hazard in the city every time the skies burst.

Experts point to the raging degradation of wetlands in and around Kampala that would store, filter and drain out the water to its final destination mainly Lake Victoria.

Dangers

Mr Richard Kimbowa of the Uganda Coalition for Sustainable Development, a civil society organisation, says the devastating floods that have claimed human lives and destroyed property, just signal the onset of disasters to befall Kampala, Wakiso and Mukono districts.

"Wetlands naturally regulate floods, but look at Kyambogo in the past years; that place would regulate its water and there was no flooding. Now, water is finding its level and the result has been floods," Mr Kimbowa observed.

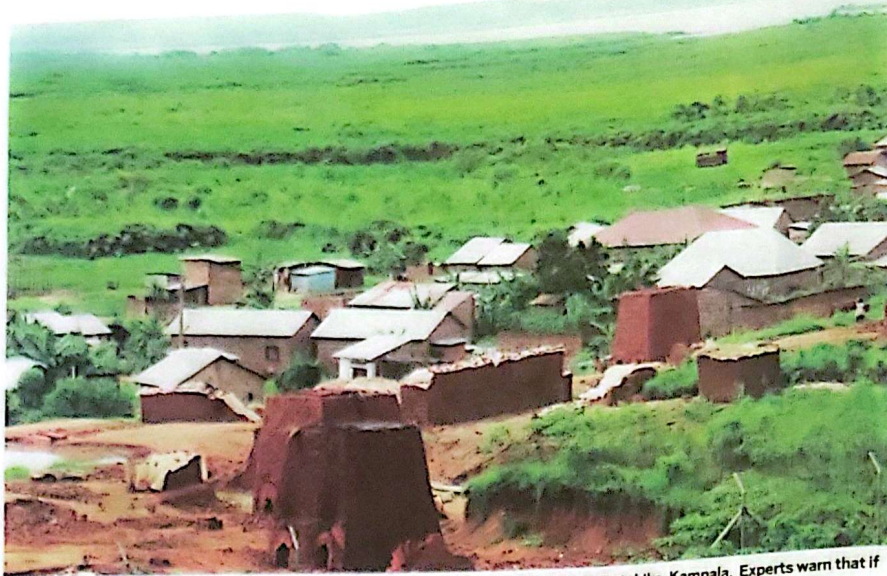
Kinawataka wetland that received rainwater from Nakawa, Kyambogo, Banda and the neighbouring areas has been reclaimed by industrialists, cultivators and settlers thus diminishing its capacity to hold and filter water.

"I anticipate in the coming years to see the city being cut off by floods whenever it rains because these wetlands are being destroyed at an alarming rate," he adds.

Ugandans who lived in Kampala three decades ago would attest to the fog and moist weather in the mornings. That, has faded.

Temperatures are increasing across the country and Kampala now records more than 28°C. Meteorological records show Kampala's temperature used to be less than 26°C in the past.

"That fog and mist in the morning as a result of wetlands. But as wetlands were degraded, that faded. It had a cooling effect which is very important in an urban setting in Kampala," said Mr Paul Mafabi, Director of Environment in the



Encroached. Structures that have been established on a wetland near Lake Victoria in Butabika, Kampala. Experts warn that if wetland degradation is not checked, the country is headed for disaster. PHOTO BY RACHEL MABALA



Flooded. Motorists struggle to go through a flooded road in Ntinda recently. PHOTO BY SHABISAH NAKIRIGYA

Ministry of Water and Environment.

He told *Daily Monitor*, ahead of the World Wetlands Day today, that wetlands and forests contribute 40 per cent of rainfall formation in the country but Uganda is fast losing its marshlands.

Importance of wetlands

World Wetlands Day is celebrated annually on February 2, the day of the adoption of the Convention on Wetlands in 1971 in the Iranian city of Ramsar.

This year's celebrations in Uganda will be held in Arua District under the theme "Wetlands for a Sustainable Urban Future".

"If you compare with 1994, wetlands covered about 15 per cent of land surface area. As we speak today, we have between 8 and 9 per cent. So we have lost a minimum of 30 per cent of our wetlands in more than 15 to 20 years," Mr Mafabi said.

The priceless value of wetlands spans beyond filtering water from pollutants to being a key source of livelihoods for mankind.

Their vegetation, especially

papyrus serves as a raw material in crafts making, habitat for diverse creatures like birds and reptiles which in turn breed tourist attraction and balance the ecosystem.

However, despite their critical importance to human life, a report of the Ministry of Water and Environment in 2016 titled: *The Wetland Atlas for Kampala, Wakiso and Mukono*, says many wetlands in the said aforementioned areas were being converted for human settlement, industrial sites and agriculture.

Such activities, Mr Mafabi says, have led to pollution of Lake Victoria and streams which provide water for both domestic, industrial and animal use.

"In the past when it rained, it would take a week or two for the water in the city to reach Lake Victoria but now it takes just 30 minutes for the water in Nakivubo channel to reach the lake. It is that bad. This has led to a lot of silting and heavy pollution in the inner Murchison Bay," Mr Mafabi observed.

The Nakivubo wetland corridor

covers 5.29 square kilometres and is permanently waterlogged.

It covers most parts of Nakawa, Bugolobi, Mpanga and Muyenga hills carrying and filtering water from the mainland into Lake Victoria.

Besides being home to endangered bird species such as Crested Cranes, the wetland hosts Bugolobi sewage treatment plant managed by National Water and Sewerage Corporation (NWSC).

However, much of the wetland has been destroyed.

"The water in the channel is highly polluted due to the discharge of untreated and partially treated waste water and solid waste (74 per cent of which is biodegradable). The shoreline of inner Murchison Bay is dotted with numerous industries that discharge wastewater into the environment," the report of Ministry of Water and Environment reads in part.

Shs8.9b

Expenditure. The amount of money NWSC spent on treating water in 2014

Shs7.2 b

Cost. The amount of money NWSC spent on treating water in 2013.

It further states: "Research shows elevated levels of biological oxygen demand, total suspended solids, chemical oxygen demand, total nitrogen, nitrates and others as a result of the high organic load, some of which do not comply with recommended levels stipulated by the National Environment wastewater discharge standards of 1999."

The Environment minister, Mr Sam Cheptoris, attributed the declining wetland coverage

to "greedy Ugandans" who have grabbed and converted wetlands for construction of homes, farms and factories.

"Consequently, we have experienced increased flooding, reduced water quality and quantity including drying of water sources and diseases..." Mr Cheptoris said and urged urban authorities to integrate wetlands into their planning and policy formulation.

"Conserving wetlands is an enormous task that cannot be done by my ministry alone. It requires each of you to contribute to different programmes and be a mouthpiece for these voiceless yet critical natural resources," he added.

The pollution has led to increased costs of water treating by NWSC.

“It is illegal to have titles in wetlands. It is just a matter of time. They may put up structures illegally, but the law will catch up with them. I can assure you.”

MR SAM CHEPTORIS, ENVIRONMENT MINISTER

In an interview with *Daily Monitor* in 2016, Mr Sam Apedel, the NW corporate affairs manager, said the spent Shs8.9b in 2014 to treat water compared to Shs7.2 billion in previous year.

Mr Cheptoris said the ministry has, however, drafted a stringent that would impose hefty fines and stiff jail sentences on environmental offenders. He said the draft awaits Parliament approval.

He warned the culprit start counting their losses government rolls out cancellation of titles in wetlands.

"It is illegal to have titles in wetlands. It is just a matter of time. They may put up structures illegally but the law will catch up with them. I can assure you," Mr Cheptoris said.

He, however, said a number of wetlands are being restored in the country.

In 2014, the then Water and Environment minister Prof Kamuntu presented a map, showing some 17,450 titles in Kampala, Wakiso and Mukono which were in the process of cancellation.

However the move has met with resistance since the first time it was issued by the same government.

Cancellation of titles

Mr Mafabi says it is illegal to have titles in wetlands. He anticipated that the move would be a daunting task.

Quoting ongoing studies of restoration, Mr Mafabi will require about 100 hectares of Nakivubo wetland to be restored.

The 2017 Joint Environment Sector Review indicates that Uganda has lost 10.9 per cent of its wetlands. The ministry has declassified 100 hectares of critical wetlands and restored at least 476