

Nema directs refugees to plant 30 trees each

BY PAUL TAJUBA

ptajubz@ug.nationmedia.com

KAMPALA. The National Environment Management Authority (Nema) has directed refugees across all camps to plant at least 30 trees each, as a measure to replenish the dwindling forest cover.

The Nema executive director, Dr Tom Okurut, yesterday told this newspaper that they will be working with the Office of the Prime Minister to engage the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), a global agency responsible for immigrants on the same.

"The people who support refugees do not give support to the environment. Environment is their last concern. They are concerned about roads, houses ... yet when they (refugees) come here, they

first cut trees to get firewood, trees to make shelter," Dr Okurut said in an interview.

"We want the refugees to plant three times the trees they found. That way, they will live in harmony with host communities who are also depending on the same resources available," he added.

UNHCR had by press time not replied to request for comment on the environment watchdog's directive.

As of June, UNHCR put the total population of refugees and asylum seekers in Uganda at 1.277 million up from 600,000 last year.

Many of the refugees are from South Sudan and DR Congo fleeing conflicts in their home countries.

Dr Okurut said refugees face another challenge of waste management in areas they are living in since in some camps, their numbers are more than 283,272, a

population of Makindye/Ssabagabo municipality in Kampala.

"The waste generated in some camps is more than for a municipality. If we do not manage it, it will be a huge problem," he said, adding that sanitation-related diseases such as cholera, trachoma, typhoid could break out.

Although other countries lock refugees in camps, Uganda has an open policy where immigrants are

CAMPS

Refugees are hosted in settlements such as Imvepi, Palorinya in Moyo District, Achol-Pii, Bidibidi, Kiryandongo, Kyaka II, Kyangwali and Nakivale among others.

given free land to settle and cultivate for their families. Other refugees decide to freely move across the country.

Mr Swaib Andama, the Yumbe environment officer, one of the refugee hosting districts, said some refugee settlements were setup in would-be protected areas where there are endangered tree species.

"Firewood consumption is the best threat to our rare species. They [refugees] clear trees such as the Shea butter and Ebon wood for settlement, roads and yet these are trees we need to protect," Mr Andama said last week.

Shea butter or Moo yao as it is known in Lango and Acholi sub-regions, is an indigenous fruit tree that grows mostly in northern Uganda.

Its fat containing kernels are processed into cooking oil.