Govt suspends mining activities

By Mary Karugaba

In an effort to get rid of illegal miners, the Government has suspended all mining activities in the country for three months.

The state minister for energy, Eng. Simon D'Ujanga, representing energy minister Eng. Irene Muloni, told MPs on the natural resources committee yesterday that the move is to enable the Government put in place intervention measures to register all the local artisans.

D'Ujanga said the suspension is aimed at restoring and bringing sanity in the sector as the ministry develops an effective strategy to ensure that the sector contributes to the socio-economic development of the country.

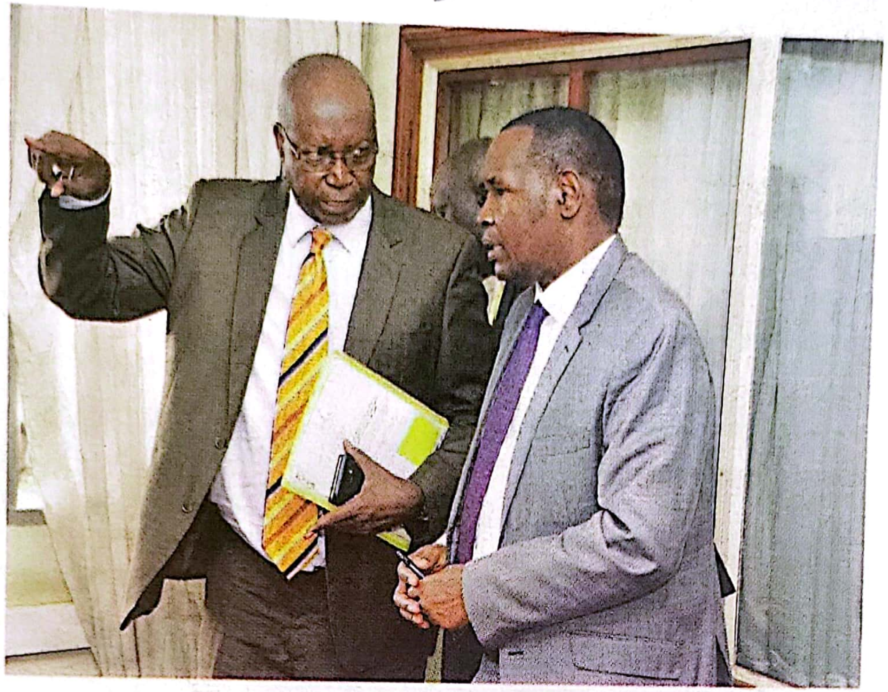
"As a result of the persistent illegal mining and related challenges in Mubende, the ministry constituted a joint team, comprising the technical team in the ministry, internal affairs ministry, the Police, army and local leaders to implement the suspension. We have started with Mubende, and will extend to other areas," he said.

D'Ujanga said the Government is also in the process of validating artisans and small-scale mining. So far, about 2,249 have been registered in Mubende, 1,614 in Namayingo and Busia districts, 600 in Karamoja region and 50 in Ntungamo. In Mubende, 155 gold dealers were also registered.

"This is aimed at regulating the supply chain of small-scale gold mining," D'Ujanga said.

He was briefing the committee, chaired by Alex Byarugaba (Isingiro), on the current status of artisanal and small scale miners in Mubende district, progress of their formalisation and the ministry's revenue generation from mining activities.

The committee also wanted a brief on why Ugandan minerals were being certified in Rwanda, instead of here. D'ujunga said prior to May, Uganda lacked an enabling legal and regulatory framework to implement the regional certification mechanism.



D'Ujanga chats with Byarugaba after a meeting at Parliament yesterday. Photo by Miriam Namutebi

As a result, most of Ugandan minerals, such as tin, tungsten and tantalum producers lacked access to world market prices, but sold to informal traders or black market actors who would then use the Rwandan system to access better market prices.

"However, the ministry is finalising the draft regulations to operationalise the regional certification mechanism tool. Some of the benefits, once concluded, will be additional tax from the export of minerals and additional investment in the mining sector, among others," he said.

During the meeting, Kassanda North MP Patrick Nsamba raised concerns over the mode of eviction, saying the miners were "heartlessly" evicted without being given enough time to prepare.

He complained that many of them were not given ample time to rescue their mining equipment and are currently stranded, with nothing to do.

Last week, over 60,000 artisanal miners operating in Mubende district were ordered to vacate the gold mines. The operation was led by the Police assisted by the army.

The energy ministry's permanent secretary, Stephen Isabalija, told the committee that the eviction was carried out "peacefully" as the Government puts in place intervention measures to register all the local artisans.

He said many miners are not registered and the Government does not know the amount of gold currently being mined in the area.

"We had to take steps because we discovered that because the sector is not regulated, the area had been invaded by non-Ugandans, including Chinese and Congolese nationals," he said.

The Mining Act, 2003 does not recognise artisanal mining in the country. The law is currently being reviewed, but, so far, only the policy has been drafted.

Byarugaba, however, wondered why the ministry had to use the army to evict the artisans.

"Why use the army?" he asked, before Army MP Brig. Innocent Oula intervened saying the law allows the Police to seek the army's assistance in enforcing the law.

Byarugaba also wondered why the ministry was taking too long to develop the mineral policy.

"Without this policy, the Government will never benefit from the minerals. Currently, we even do not know who owns the minerals," he said.

Isabalija said the draft is currently before Cabinet and will be out by December this year.