

Regional News

The miners are accused of digging underground caves and leaving pillars. When their colleagues enter at night for quick gold, they often ignore them, causing collapses.

BY TAUSINAKATO

Several lives are lost every month in mining accidents in Namayingo District as an unregulated gold rush draws unemployed youth into unsafe pits.

District officials attribute the deaths to crude mining methods, weak enforcement, and sudden shifting "gold rushes" that push miners into deep, unstable tunnels prone to collapse, suffocation, and drowning.

Namayingo Assistant Town Clerk Abdulha Kauta Twaha says the sector is chaotic and unpredictable, with many miners working in dangerous conditions without proper training or equipment.

The impact is seen in the death of 32-year-old Siraje Wafula, who lost his life in a pit collapse last October after leaving home to earn for his family.

Mr Kauta says mining hotspots shift rapidly, with areas such as Sigulu Islands becoming active almost overnight.

"Gold seems to appear overnight. Today, they're here, tomorrow elsewhere, and the numbers are huge," he says.

Mr Kauta says most mining is done through deep tunnels up to 300 metres, supported by soil pillars.

He warns that the mining system is dangerously unstable.

"Miners dig underground caves and leave pillars, but those who enter at night for quick gold often ignore them, causing collapses," Mr Kauta says.

He adds that other deaths occur when soil collapses unexpectedly, especially during the rainy season, causing suffocation or burial underground.

The deaths in gold mining sites are often under-reported and some never reach official records.

Mr Kauta estimates that between one and two people may be buried in the mines every week.

"Most deaths go unreported as employers fear legal action. Fellow workers often report missing miners, and some bodies, especially of migrants, are recovered days later," Mr Kauta said.

Investors profit from locals

Mr Kauta highlights a sharp economic imbalance in the mining sector, where investors reportedly earn substantial profits while local miners receive minimal returns.

"Investors earn a lot while locals get peanuts working all night for as little as Shs10,000," he says.

He adds that many residents turned to gold mining after fishing restrictions disrupted livelihoods that were once dependent on the lake.

Mr Kauta says many miners operate outside district control, as licensing is done centrally with less local involvement.

"Some get licences in Kampala and come straight to the ground, bypassing our Department of Natural Resources," he says.

Mr Kauta also says children are increasingly drawn into mining in Na-

How Namayingo gold mines are claiming lives monthly



Resident of Kifuyo Village in Namayingo District search for gold at Bulamba Gold Mine at the weekend. PHOTO/ASU-MAN MUSOBYA

mayingo District due to poverty and cheap labour, with whole families involved.

He adds that one child died after drowning in an abandoned pit filled with water.

Limited enforcement

Mr Kauta says weak enforcement, limited resources, and external interference undermine mining regulation, as district efforts are often blocked despite working with security agencies.

He adds that some miners operate with exploration licence holders, making the line between legal and illegal mining unclear.

"The district lacks dedicated rescue teams for mining accidents, leaving fellow miners to carry out risky rescue efforts during collapses," he adds.

Mr Kauta calls for urgent reforms, including local involvement in licensing, stronger safety enforcement, regulation of artisanal mining, and the promotion of alternative livelihoods to reduce dependence on risky gold mining.

The Namayingo Natural Resources Officer, Mr Alex Busagwa, says most mining in the district is artisanal and informal, making regulation difficult.

He says licensed mining is minimal, while most activity takes place outside formal frameworks.

"We only have one small-scale licensed operator. The rest are artisanal miners using traditional methods," he says.

Unsafe mining

Mr Busagwa says many deaths result from digging too deep into unstable ground, especially during rainy seasons.

"When it rains, the soil becomes weak. The walls collapse and trap those inside," he says.

Mr Busagwa warns that mining is causing environmental damage, in-

SHS10,000

Peanuts. The amount some locals earn after working all night, while investors take home the lion's share.

cluding wetland destruction and water contamination.

He warns that miners use hazardous chemicals such as mercury, cyanide, sulphuric acid, and caustic soda, which pollute ecosystems.

"These chemicals accumulate in the body and act as slow poisons," he says, adding that wetlands, which support agriculture and act as natural water filters, are being destroyed.

Mr Busagwa says enforcement remains weak due to limited funding,



Rescue crisis.

The district lacks dedicated rescue teams for mining accidents. This leaves fellow miners to carry out risky rescue efforts when ever collapses occur. There is generally a weak emergency response systems,"

Mr Abdulha Kauta Twaha, Namayingo Assistant Town Clerk

Records issue.

"We struggle to get accurate numbers [of people who die] because some incidents are hidden and cooperation from the community is low. Police have made arrests in some cases over negligence..."

Mr Michael Kasadha, Busoga East police spokesperson

technical expertise, and manpower needed to effectively monitor mining activities.

"We have personnel, but we don't have enough resources to effectively monitor all mining sites," he says, noting that inspections are often irregular and depend on donor or partner support, which undermines efforts to safeguard lives.

Mr Julius Katusiime, the Executive Director of Namayingo Miners Association, says deaths in Namayingo mining sites are mainly caused by crude mining methods, weak enforcement, and poor safety practices.

"Most of the deaths we see are due to poor mining methods and lack of proper safety measures," he says.

Mr Katusiime, who is also the Chief Executive Officer of Precious Gold Leach, a company dealing in mining, says unregulated operations and dangerous underground techniques increase the risk of pit collapses and fatalities.

"When people dig without proper support systems, the tunnels easily collapse and lives are lost," Mr Katusiime says.

Corruption

He adds that corruption and weak government monitoring have worsened safety standards, contributing to frequent accidents.

"Corruption has made enforcement weak, and that is why accidents keep happening," Mr Katusiime says.

He says although recent interventions have reduced deaths, mining remains risky due to poor structures and unsafe working conditions.

"Things have slightly improved, but mining is still very dangerous because safety is not fully observed," he adds.

Mr Allan Derick Ojumbo, a miner, says accidents are common in gold sites due to poor safety practices.

He recalls that in December last year, two miners from Ankole Sub-region

were buried alive in a pit at Bugiri Mining Site.

"People die in pits because safety is not ensured. Some are poorly dug and filled with water, increasing accident risks," he says.

Mr Ojumbo says experienced miners can sometimes detect early signs of collapse and escape in time.

"I have survived several incidents. Sometimes I go down with oxygen pumps to drain water, and place logs to strengthen pillars," he says.

He admits that authorities were slow to respond to mining deaths, but improved after miners' protests.

"Previously, bodies were not removed from collapsed pits until they protested. Now officials intervene and help retrieve them," he says.

Mr Ojumbo says he continues mining due to lack of alternative source of income, though frequent deaths of colleagues leave him traumatised.

Police report

The Busoga East police spokesperson, Mr Michael Kasadha, says the district has registered only three deaths since the beginning of the year in Namayingo and Bugiri mining areas.

Mr Kasadha says the recorded deaths this year were caused by different incidents, including electrocution, pit collapses, and suffocation.

"In the first incident, one person died after being electrocuted when a generator was connected to a pit without protective gear. In another recent case, two people suffocated after entering an abandoned pit that had no oxygen," he says.

Mr Kasadha says many mining-related deaths go unreported, making it difficult to establish exact figures.

He adds that in some cases, bodies are quickly removed from sites before police arrive, while others are concealed entirely.

"We struggle to get accurate numbers because some incidents are hidden and cooperation from the community is low," Mr Kasadha reveals.

He discloses that police have made arrests in some cases, with at least one person already charged over negligence in illegal mining activities.

Mineral Protection Unit

Mr Kasadha explains that the Mineral Protection Unit is actively enforcing safety measures and closing unsafe or illegal pits.

"We have instructed that no more operations should continue in unsafe areas, and we shall keep enforcing that order," he says.

Mr Kasadha adds that police are conducting community sensitisation campaigns to educate residents about the dangers of unsafe mining, especially in pits without protective structures or equipment.

Whether one death or four per month, the reality in Namayingo's gold mines remains serious, as miners continue to risk their lives in unstable pits with little protection.

With enforcement gaps, informal operations, and rising poverty driving the rush, stakeholders say urgent action is needed before more lives are lost underground.