

Illegal sand miners in Lwera create mini-lakes

The miners who previously used rudimentary methods and tools have advanced to bigger boats to boost extraction.

BY ANTONIO KALYANGO

Artisanal sand miners have scaled up their illegal operations in Lwera Wetland in both Kalungu and Mpigi districts, leaving open pits that appear like mini-lakes along the Kampala-Masaka highway.

In April, the National Environment Management Authority (Nema), in conjunction with other authorities, carried out operations against illegal sand miners in Lwera that saw the arrest of six people and the impounding of several machines.

However, illegal activities resumed in just days in total violation of environmental protection guidelines.

At all illegal sand mining sites in Lwera run by artisanal miners, pits have expanded into mini-lakes measuring approximately two to four football pitches.

At such openly visible mining sites, just about 30 metres from the highway, miners who previously used rudimentary methods and tools such as spades and canoes have advanced to bigger boats to boost extraction as experts warn that the damage being caused will have far-reaching impacts.

Due to the water levels in Lwera, which is located a few kilometres away from the shores of Lake Victoria, there are fears that the ongoing heavy rains may cause floods that could submerge the Kampala-Masaka highway if degradation is not checked.

Mr Emmanuel Mukasa, a resident of Kamuwunga Village in Lukaya Town Council, Kalungu District, urged the government to swiftly review and strengthen its environmental protection policies.

"The heavier damage is being done in-



Illegal artisanal miners excavate sand in Lwera swamp in April. PHOTO/COURTESY

side the ecosystem where you can't see while on the highway. Heavy machines are being used and what remains there are big open pits, which turn into breeding grounds for mosquitoes," he said.

Mr James Frank Kasibante, a programmes manager at Biodiversity Conservation Foundation (BCF), a local conservation initiative, warned that unregulated sand and clay mining in Lwera is causing severe environmental degradation, which is threatening the ecological system.

"This is a very vital ecology that supports the local economy in various ways, on top of regulating weather patterns, and we're wondering how authorities can be reluctant in enforcing existing laws," she said.

She added that many people get fish they sell for a living, as well as raw materials for the craft industry from the wetland, so its degradation poses both macro and micro multi-sectoral im-

pacts, and urged Nema and local authorities to adopt sustainable measures.

"Look at how close the extraction site is to the road. It means we shall always be repairing it. What about the local economy supported by the wetland? We demand viable mechanisms to en-

sure adherence to the law and enforcement guidelines," she said.

Mr Ahmed Nyombi Mukiibi, the chairperson of Kalungu District, castigated Nema and other authorities over the discriminatory application of the law during enforcement by focusing on small-scale encroachers while leaving big companies operating freely.

"I'm not satisfied with the operations in Lwera because there are areas where sand mining companies are guarded by the armed men, sometimes in military uniform and are no-go areas even for enforcement officers, so seizing canoes and spades will not save the wetland," he said.

However, he advised Nema officials to engage local leaders so that they can sustain the fruits of the enforcement.

Ms Naomi Karekaho, the head of corporate communications at Nema, last week asked for more time to first consult her superiors. However, she had not offered a response by press time.

THE LAW

Wetland degradation is a crime under Section 55 of the National Environment Act, Cap 181, and is punishable with a fine not exceeding Shs600m or imprisonment not exceeding 12 years or both. The same law requires an illegal miner to restore a degraded part of the ecosystem relatively to its original condition, which is not the case at many sites in Lwera.