

## DEFENDING LAND AND ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS

# More women are going to be sexually abused and forced to lose their land to the rich/investors as Uganda goes into a semi lockdown of 42 days



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By [witnessradio.org](https://witnessradio.org)



**Opondo entering with a bicycle in her muddy thatched house.**

By [witnessradio.org](https://witnessradio.org) Team

Opondo Cathy, (not real name due to the sensitivity of the matter), has never owned even a small radio in her entire life. This is a clear indication that the villager may not be aware of

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critical developments in the country. And this does not come as a shock, since the first time she heard the news of the COVID-19 in Uganda was when she visited her neighbor who's 500 meters away from her home, barely a month after Uganda had even registered a first case COVID-19.

Little did she know that land grabbers would take advantage of the lockdown to sexually abuse and humiliate, subdue demolish her house and grab her land.

Before COVID-19 misfortune struck, Opondo lived peacefully on her 6-acre piece of land, where she used to grow crops like banana, cassava, beans, and maize for both home consumption and sale. And experienced a happy life in her muddy structured house with her four children.

She could properly feed her family, and offer basic needs, but now, she rents in a nearby village, working like Trojans to find ends meet.

There were many violent attempts to evict her and others on their land but they would always resist. This time around, the grabbers resorted to sexually abuse her because she's a woman as a tool to weaken the poor lady and force her to leave the only source of income.

According to her, a dozen of women and young girls have been sexually abused and harassed in their area, because they resisted surrendering their land to the company.

"We withstood all their beatings, destruction of our property, arrests, but the rape thing was intolerable," she adds while weeping.

On the fateful day of 18<sup>th</sup> August 2020, Opondo had gone to pick her pieces of stuff at a nearby Bweyale town. While returning home at about 8:00 pm, she was attacked and sexually abused by a private security guard attached to one of the multinational companies involved in large-scale agribusinesses. The rapist attacked her from behind and tried to strangle her neck and grabbed her mouth, and hit her to the ground.

"I struggled with him, but he overpowered me, he put me down and raped me. I yelled louder for my rescue, but the neighbors were far. As soon as the rapist had them coming, he ran away," she adds.

"The louder yelling brought those nearby to come to my rescue, they did not even bother to ask me what had happened, because I already looked victimized. They decided to look for the rapist. Whereas I had a walking disability after the horrific incident, we went to the company offices where I always used to see him but unfortunately, he was not there," she further reveals.

During the first lockdown, public transport had been banned, which made it hard to reach out to a police post for help since it was distant.

After two days, Opondo managed to get to the area police to report the incident. In her own words, the officer on duty (a policeman) asked her if she had evidence and if that was not assaulted. When she asked for a police medical form to be examined, she was referred to a nearby Health Centre Three (III) with a small chit of a paper indicating that she was assaulted not raped. On meeting the medical officer, she handed over the chit and was examined on grounds of assault, not rape.



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"I could hardly walk and had severe pain in my genital organs, which even a blind person could see, but because the police work with the multinational companies to evict us, they said I was only assaulted not raped, the mother of four adds.

According to Opondo, she had already received several threats and warnings from the agents of her evictors (Agilis Partners Limited). "They used to tell me, if I don't leave the land I should not regret what will happen to me. Indeed I now regret," she reveals.

Despite being raped is not even enough, her house was later torched by agents of Agilis Partners who claimed that she had illegally occupied their land. On that day they (her family) slept in cold and exposed to vagrancies of nature.

Agilis Partners Limited is among the three multinational companies that have violently and illegally evicted the poor communities off their land in Kiryandongo district without a court order or following due processes.

Other multinationals include Great Seasons SMC Limited, solely owned by a Sudanese investor based in Dubai, and Kiryandongo Sugar Limited owned by RAI Dynasty.

In the same village, Opondo and others, close to 100 were evicted to pave way for large-scale grain and oilseeds farming business. The company claimed it had lawfully acquired the land.

"I am an emotional wreck, my life was ruined, if I can't afford to provide for my family, do I have any meaning?" she angrily asks.

"I always burned the candle at both ends to be able to provide for my family, but all their dreams were shuttered, they no longer attend school. I had no money to feed them and had to transfer them to the village, they currently live with their 78 aged grandmas somewhere in northern Uganda", she adds.

Although the kids were transferred, they face a lot of destitutions due because of the grandmother who can hardly meet their basic needs.

"Even when they went to the village I still the caretaker of the family. I do distasteful works that I don't want them to know," she reveals.

While Uganda starts its 42 days semi- COVID-19 lockdown, it is notably clear that a significant number of Ugandans will be sharing the same eviction stories as Opondo's.

Research findings from Witness Radio show more than 50,000 people across Uganda were subjected to sexual and gender based violence, illegally evicted off their land during the first COVID-19 lockdown, further more women and girls suffered most.

Shortly after Uganda went into a total lockdown on March, 18th 2020, the government through the ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development halted all land evictions throughout the lockdown to comply with the president's directive of staying at home, but, the evictions suddenly increased as the pandemic gave a total advantage to the opportunists to easily access millions of hectares with the backing of the government and other influential politicians in the country. The first lockdown was later relaxed in mid-August, the same year.

Now, Uganda announced a second semi-lockdown on 6th, June 2021 for 42 days where schools, Worshipping places and inter-district public transport have been burned.

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President of Uganda Mr. Yoweri Museveni on a televised address announced 40 new measures to curb the second wave of the pandemic. Among them include, the closure of schools, ban of communal prayers, and public gatherings/workshops all for 42 days, inter-district travel banned for 14 days, private vehicles limited to just 3 people including the driver, and many other measures.

Currently, Uganda has 53,961 COVID-19 confirmed cases, 383 deaths and 47,760 have recovered from the disease.

According to witness radio, evictions will not only live many Ugandans landless but also puts them at higher chances of being sexually abused by people who are supposed to protect them.

Experts say that in a pandemic, an eviction is particularly dangerous, leading a person to double up with friends and family in a crowded housing situation that easily accelerates the virus' speed.

With no guidelines at the moment to protect indigenous and poor people, it is evident that tens of thousands of Ugandans will be affected by the ruthless actions of the land grabbers.

"If the grabbers managed to disregard the previous guidelines and continued to carry out their dubious schemes, what will happen to people now when there are no political heads of ministries including Land? Says, Witness Radio.

In the meantime, earlier today, the Chief Justice of Uganda, Alfonse Owiny Dollo also suspended court hearings and appearances for 42 days as a measure to curb the spread of coronavirus.

The Chief Justice said the move is in line with President Museveni's directives on prevention and mitigation of the virus.

Whereas the closing of courtrooms makes sense for public health reasons, the delays are likely to create an overwhelming backlog of cases and have legal ramifications, since defendants are guaranteed a speedy and fair trial under the Constitution.

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