

## Former MP, investors evict thousands in Kiryandongo

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by Joseph Olanyo

Former Kiryandongo district Member of Parliament (MP), Baitera Maiteki, an American and an Indian investor have been accused of evicting thousands of people in the western districts of Kiryandongo and Masindi.

The evicted people were living in the gazetted government ranches in Mutunda and Kiryandongo sub-counties along the River Nile. Kiryandongo Sugar, allegedly owned by some Indians, Agilis, owned by an American called Philip Investor, and Sole Agro Business Company, also owned by Indians, have been named in the evictions.

Agilis is said to have bought ranches 21-22, from SODARI, an agricultural farm that collapsed. SODARI got a lease from government, which ends in 2025. However, it was revealed to the Land Commission of Inquiry that Agilis, bought land that was leased, yet legally, no one is supposed to buy leased land.

Agro Business was reportedly given about 60 hectares and displaced all people in the area. Kiryandongo Sugar also forcefully evicted people in the area and ploughed all the land, denying some residents farmland and access roads.

The revelations were made before the commission of Inquiry into Land matters chaired by Justice Catherine Bamugemereire. Bamugemereire, together with Commissioners; Mary Oduka Ochan, Joyce Habasa, Dr Rose Nakayi, Fred Ruhindi, George Bagonza Tinkamanyire, and Robert Sebunya, are conducting regional consultative meetings and field visits in form of public hearings called barazas.

In Kiryandongo, former MP Maiteki, who until recently was reportedly attached to State House, is accused of grabbing 30 acres of land belonging to the family of Joshua Kitembo. Kitembo's daughter, Biingi Katusiime, told the Land Commission of Inquiry at Kiryandongo Boma grounds that Maiteki with the help of police has denied them access to their land.

"Maiteki has razed 40 graves and has blocked us from burying our dear ones in our ancestral land. We have been in court for the last 16 years and we have spent a lot of money on this issue, but no justice has been done to date. You go to the RDC [resident district commissioner] for help, he tells you the matter is in court. You go to the DISO, he says he fears. So, where should we go now, we appeal to the Land Commission of Inquiry to intervene in this matter," Katusiime said.

While giving a detailed account of the land conflicts in the area before the Land commission in Kiryandongo on August 5, one of the affected persons, Jacob Karuhanga Ateenyi, said government was supposed to resettle the affected communities on its ranches. Karuhanga said this has not been done and that the National Forestry Authority (NFA) is evicting them from the reserves.

Karuhanga said other communities were shifted from the government ranches to the Nyamakere and Kibeka forest reserves. Government has 37 ranches in the area, and the most affected areas are ranches 9, 11, 20, 21, 22, 23, 28,

29 and 30, where the Kibyama, Nubian, Nyamakere and Kibeka communities have lived since the 1970s.

A ranch is approximate five square miles. So, government owns a total of 185 square miles of land. Most of it is being occupied on and off by some investors and individuals, whose commercial farming initiatives have reportedly failed to take off.

“Our concern is that there is total negligence and inconclusive action by duty bearers on this matter. The president and government offered ranch number 11 to resettle these two categories of people, but up to date no resettlement programme has taken place which has resulted into these problems,” Karuhanga said.

“The Kibyama communities are supposed to be resettled on ranch number 11. The Nyamakere and Kibeka community were shifted by government and taken to the Nyamakere and Kibeka forests reserves. But although they took them there on government consent, there was no official documentation”.

Karuhanga said because there was no documentation, the NFA is threatening to evict them. In his brief to the Land Commision, the Kiryandongo district chairperson, Charles Ntairehoki Amooti, said some investors do not want to cooperate with the district authorities.

Citing an example of Agilis, Amooti said, “Agilis is a very stubborn company. Maybe because it is a foreign company. You agree on an issue to be discussed amicably, but they go and do the opposite. They have an American who thinks he is above the law.”

“Agilis has tortured people here a lot. I called for a meeting, but instead, they wrote for me a warning letter that I should stand warned. Can you imagine, how can you warn a district chairperson who is concerned about the well-being of his people? he said.

None of the accused organizations or individuals attended the consultative meeting though they were invited. Agilis sent a farm manager and their lawyer, from Katende and Sempebwa Company advocates who didn't talk. The consultative meetings continue in Arua.

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