

Oil firm wins Uganda project court battle



A worker preparing oil palm fruits for processing at the Bidco factory in Uganda. FILE | NATION MEDIA GROUP

JAMES KARIUKI in Nairobi

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Kenya's edible oil and detergents maker Bidco Africa was Tuesday cleared off allegations of seizing forestland on Uganda's Bugala Island to develop a palm tree plantation.

High Court Judge Wilson Kwesiga ruled that no evidence had been adduced showing the multi-national firm with 17 subsidiaries across Africa violated the rights of residents of Uganda's Ssesse Island to a clean environment.

"The defendants (Bidco) have never asked the Government of Uganda to de-gazette any forest reserve as claimed in the plaint, no forest reserve has been de-gazetted as a result. The land provided on lease to Bidco by the government for the oil palm tree project was not forestland and therefore the issue of de-gazettement should not have arisen," Justice Kwesiga.

Public interest

Three environmental groups moved to court where they filed a public interest case accusing Bidco of coercing the Uganda government, through the National Forestry Authority, to de-gazette forest reserves on Bugala Island for the growing of oil palm trees.

"None of the defendants (Bidco) have entered or cleared any forest reserve and claims to the contrary are false. In fact no forest has been de-gazetted to date," the judgment added.

Bidco, through its subsidiary Oil Palm Uganda Limited (OPUL), launched an oil palm tree plantation after it was allocated 6,500 hectares for the nucleus estate with 1,750 outgrowers contracted within the same island to grow oil palm trees on 3,500 hectares on Buagala Island, which is part of 84 islands forming Kalangala District.

Image crisis

But their business suffered an image crisis after some activists moved to court, citing the project as an environmental hazard as OPUL was busy logging.

The court added that no evidence was produced by the plaintiffs showing palm trees had an adverse effect to the environment,

but supported the project saying palm trees had a double positive effect on the environment and on people's pockets.

The suit was termed unnecessary since the applicants would have received all their information they needed by seeking the company (OPUL's) documents on their numerous environmental audits conducted at Bugala before and after the project took off.

Enjoy the fruits

Bidco Uganda Managing Director Kodey Rao, Kalangala Oil Palm Growers Association Chairman Martin Lugambwa and Kalangala Oil Palm Growers Trust General Manager Nelson Basalidde welcomed the verdict.

"This is great news. Let them leave us to enjoy the fruits of Oil Palm with our families. Our lives have changed, our children are going to good schools and we are happy. Let them leave us alone," said Mr Lugambwa.



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