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by Suzgo Chitete November 25, 2018

The Greenbelt Authority (GBA) has found itself in a collision course with hundreds of farming families in some parts of the country who are accusing the government initiative of encroachment and land grabbing.

In some cases, aggrieved farmers are seeking legal intervention to halt greenbelt-related activities in their areas.

Nation on Sunday has learnt that about 220 farming families in the area of group village head Nkhwazi in Traditional Authority Ngabu, Chikwawa are protesting the greenbelt investment which is promoting cotton farming, accusing it of invading their land without consent.



Some of the affected farmers stand on the disputed land

In another case, hundreds of families in the area of group village head Chiphanga, under Traditional Authority (T/A) Khombedza in Salima, are also crying foul after GBA told them to vacate their land for sugar production.

In Chikwawa, both Nchalo Greenbelt Association and Paramount Chief Lundu have downplayed the community's concern, describing it as "a protest out of ignorance and sabotage of economic development".

According to a report submitted to Landnet in July this year, 220 small-scale farmers under group village head Nkhwazi in T/A Ngabu claimed their land was taken by GBA without their consent.

The farmers allege that the invasion was orchestrated by Paramount Chief Lundu who asked the farmers to surrender land to Nchalo Growers Association, which is now called Nchalo Greenbelt Association (NGA).

One of the leaders for the affected families Joel Blande, in a telephone interview, confirmed lodging a complaint to Landnet and Greenbelt Initiative.

Landnet programme manager Tawonga Chihana also confirmed that the organisation received a complaint and that they have been on the ground to assess the situation.

"So, we engaged Greenbelt Authority and during our first meeting they claimed that they did not know about it and that they were not involved. But the most interesting thing is [when we visited the area] the machinery which was being used on site actually belonged to Greenbelt Authority and, actually, they were also people working on the field wearing Greenbelt Authority labelled overalls," said Chihana.

She further said after engaging the GBA with more information, meetings between the two were scheduled, but the authority was not forthcoming, leading to legal intervention to have the project stopped until the issue is

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sorted out.

“Each time we scheduled a meeting they did not seem forthcoming and we are getting pressure from the community. You know, it is farming season and they want to go back to their fields, so we just thought of taking this to our lawyers, who are currently working it,” she added.

Responding to our questionnaire, GBA public relations officer Maganizo Mazeze said they are aware of the concerns but their local partner, Nchalo Smallholder Cane Growers Association, was better placed to explain. He said the partner has been asked to verify claims being made by the farmers.

“GBA is collaborating with Nchalo Smallholder Cane Growers Association [NSHCA] to implement a project under the Nchalo GBI Limited Company. These farmers, through the association, are implementing the project on their piece of land and not GBA's land.

“Since the farmers are under the NSHCA, we have referred this matter to them to verify whether those listed are indeed their Association Members,” he said.

Nchalo Smallholder Cane Growers Association (turned Nchalo Greenbelt Association) admitted being in some ‘fight’ with community members who are opposed to the investment.

According to the association's general manager Robert Nkhwazi, the concerned farmers border the land which is being used for cotton farming under Greenbelt Initiative while the farmers use their land for rice farming.

Without dismissing claims of encroachment, Nkhwazi said the farmers who are protesting the Greenbelt project are doing so out of ignorance.

“We understand them. Some want to cling to this land just for grazing their livestock when this development will improve their economic livelihood. We thought this issue was sorted out but they continue to protest. Let's not jeopardise this important investment by having negative reporting. Don't listen to those farmers complaining out of ignorance,” said Nkhwazi.

His sentiments have full backing of Paramount Chief Lundu who considers the protesting community as enemies of development.

According to Lundu, he has not abused his powers in influencing the establishment of the Greenbelt project in his area, but he has done so out of the love of his people.

“My aim is to make sure my people are happy. This is why I thought of this project. But the problem is that some of the people want to be using the land for grazing livestock. We think this is underutilising the land and this project has a lot of support from the community save for these few selfish individuals who want to sabotage the project,” Lundu said.

In Salima, communities in the area of group village head Chimphanga, claim that following the establishment of the GBA facilitated Salima Sugar Factory they were promised not to be relocated, a decision which they say has now changed.

In an interview, one of the affected villagers Davis Tembo told *Nation on Sunday* that they have just been told to vacate their land and settle at another arranged place.

“We received a notice to leave the place and got K90 000 as compensation for the house,” he said.

But T/A Khombedza said the community in question has no right to claim ownership over the land as it belonged to government through Press Agriculture.

Khombedza defended the Greenbelt Initiative, describing it as “productive use of land”. He added that he has his weight behind the project.

According to Landnet, cases of investors taking away land from locals is becoming common, and that is why they have intervened in this case, to have a balance of interest between investment and people's livelihood.

Mazeze, however, said the Salima communities were expressing discontent because they wanted to be paid quicker.

“They know they will be relocated because an awareness [exercise] was conducted, but as for Nchalo it is just a misunderstanding,” he said.

In September, our sister newspaper *The Nation* reported that some people under village heads Yafeti Mwakasungura and Ngosi in Karonga refused to be part of the Nthora-Illora-Ngosi Irrigation Scheme Project for fear of losing their customary land, but GBA authorities assured the traditional leaders that the project would not displace anyone.

According to GBA, the authority has in excess of 20 000 hectares for various projects nationwide, with 6 000 hectares meant for the Salima Sugar Project, 1 500 for Malawi Mangoes and 300 hectares for the Chikwawa project.

The mandate is to promote commercial irrigation agriculture in any area with a radius of 20 kilometres from a water source in designated Greenbelt area.

The Greenbelt Authority, which was started as an initiative by the Bingu wa Mutharika administration, receives its funding under the ‘Subvented Organisations’ (vote 275). It had a development budget of K1.5 billion under the subvention in the 2018/19 proposed National Budget. n


