



Uganda's farmers battle palm oil Goliaths for land

Published: 25 Jul 2015

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AFP | 25 July 2015

Uganda's farmers battle palm oil Goliaths for land

by Amy Fallon

Bumangi (Uganda) (AFP) - Even before the bulldozers arrived life was tough for John Muiyisa, scratching a living from a rented farm on Lake Victoria's Kalangala island.



Even before the bulldozers arrived life was tough for John Muiyisa, scratching a living from a rented farm on Lake Victoria's Kalangala island (Photo: AFP Isaac Kasamani)

Now he has almost nothing and is seeking compensation in Ugandan courts from the palm oil plantations he blames for seizing the land and destroying his livelihood.

As land grabs by local firms linked to multinationals drive small-holder farmers out of business, a rights group behind a February bid for compensation by 100 farmers says rights violations and environmental degradation are also at stake.

Muyliisa, a 53-year old father of nine, had leased a 17 hectare (40 acre) plot farming coffee, bananas, cassava and potatoes on Kalangala island. But in 2011 that land was taken and cleared for a palm oil estate.

"It's like I'm starting all over again now," Muiyisa said, adding he once could earn over 1,400 dollars a year (1,300 euros) but is now struggling to survive.

"With that land, some of my children even completed university, but now I've taken some out of school, some of my daughters are doing housework to earn money."

It is a story repeated elsewhere in Africa, where large internationally-backed companies are snapping up agricultural land, and activists claim their actions deprive local farmers of basic needs.

But Muiyisa did not legally own the land he farms -- the title deeds are held by the local Sempa family.

Horatius Sempa said the 14 farmers were "illegal squatters," but acknowledged some had received payments of between \$35 and \$200 while others had been allowed to continue farming smaller parcels of land. Muiyisa was left with three hectares (7.5 acres).

The palm oil project is being carried out by Oil Palm Uganda, a subsidiary of local food producer Bidco Uganda. Bidco in turn is a joint venture between global palm oil giant Wilmar International -- backed by several European banks and financiers -- and other international partners.

It is also supported by the UN's International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), which offers government loans at subsidised interest rates to set up plantations.

- 'Total robbery' -

Campaigners say the Kalangala case highlights a growing conflict over land rights and ownership in Africa between those who hold the legal deeds and the generations of smallholders who occupy and invest in farmland, potentially earning themselves squatters' rights to remain.

"It is happening in Liberia, Nigeria, Tanzania," said environmental campaigner David Kureeba from Friends of the Earth in Uganda, which is supporting the farmers' legal challenge.

"Expansion of palm oil will lead to food insecurity, human rights violations, environmental degradation

The **Declaration of the Global Convergence of Land and Water Struggles** launched in Dakar at the African Social Forum in October 2014 and reworked in Tunis at the World Social Forum in March 2015 is open for signature and engagement.

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and climate change," he argued.

Friends of the Earth this month called for Wilmar to immediately halt its palm oil development plans in Nigeria, which they describe as a "key frontier country" for palm oil expansion leading to "conflict".

Muyiisa, one of over 100 farmers in Uganda who lost their farms, are hoping the court will order the land to be handed back, along with "fair compensation" for damages.

They claim they were kicked off the land without warning and the compensation they got was derisory.

Muyiisa's mother-in-law, Magdalena Nakamya, a 64-year-old widow with eight children, depended on a three-hectare (seven acre) plot growing cassava and potatoes, earning over 250 dollars (180 euros) a month.

"Then they came and measured up, and the next I heard there was digging," said Nakamya, describing the day the bulldozers arrived. "Now I'm making very little money."

Kalangala island in the vast freshwater Lake Victoria appears idyllic, but Bidco -- which launched the ambitious Oil Palm Uganda Limited (OPUL) development in 2004, and by the end of 2012 had been given 7,700 hectares of land (17 acres) by the government -- says it was once at the bottom of the pile for economic development.

The food producer dismisses claims it has caused harm, saying the palm oil farm has instead boosted development on the island.

Bidco boasts Kalangala now is among the top 10 developed districts in the east African country, after "working harmoniously and closely with the community" on the joint public-private partnership.

Wilmar said in a statement that the court had ordered mediation, pointing out the company had played no role in buying the land.

"We are disappointed that our efforts to engage with the stakeholders concerned, that is the alleged affected communities and NGO involved, were not reciprocated," the company said.

But for Muyiisa, the case is clear.

"In the end some were scared and took anything offered," said Muyiisa, claiming some farmers were paid as little as \$16, others just \$33. "It wasn't much. Some were offered really poor money and refused it because they thought 'this is total robbery'."

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