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Archive

Why I support Mabira Forest give-away to Mehta Group Publish

Date: Apr 19, 2007

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By Yoweri Museveni

You must have been following the controversy surrounding our decision to give some forest land to the manufacturers. There are three forest lands that have, so far, been given out to the manufacturers. These are:

- Some land in Kalangala for BIDCO, the palm oil project;
- Some forest land in Mabira for Mehta to expand his sugar operations; and,
- Earlier on, we had given the planted forest at Namanve for an industrial park.

I have been involved in these land allocations. Why? It is on account of the urgent need for industrialising our very backward but rich country in terms of natural resources and raw materials. Our backwardness, at this stage, is on account of the absence of industries. In the past, our backwardness was due to many other factors: interfering with the private sector;

- Low level of literacy and education;
- Government monopolies in marketing in the form of Marketing Boards;
- A currency that was not convertible;
- Impassable roads;
- Insecurity of persons and property; etc.

The Movement has solved all these problems. To take one example, the Movement has expanded so much the education sector that we now have a very large number of university graduates floating on the streets without jobs. By 1986, [Makerere University](#), the only university in the country that time, used to graduate about 2,000 persons each year. Today, that same Makerere graduates about 10,000 persons each year. This does not include those graduating from another 17 universities (both government and private). How long shall we go on with this problem of educated people without jobs? This is, especially, a problem for parents who sponsor their own children. What help is the Government and the State institutions (Parliament, Civil Service, etc) giving to such parents when their children fail to get jobs after sacrificing so much to educate them through private sponsorship? How about millions of others who leave P.7, S.4 or S.6? How can the leaders of the country take this issue in a leisurely way year after year?

Employment creation is one of my main interests when I support manufacturers, hotels, etc, in acquiring land. There are three other interests that we serve when we give manufacturers and hotels land. These are:

- Through value addition, increasing export earnings and import substitution (e.g producing sugar here instead of importing it);
- Expanding Government tax revenues because of either taxing the manufactured goods produced or (as a result of people who get jobs, while they were previously unemployed, paying indirect taxes through consumption of luxuries e.g beer, perfumes, buying expensive cars. etc " items that have taxes on them: and

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paying expensive cars, etc. decisions that have caused our enemy, and

- Providing markets for our raw materials produced by the farmers that just rot because of lack of processing e.g bananas, milk, etc.

The difference between Europe and, now, some of the Asian countries on the one hand and Africa on the other hand is precisely this. The others use factories to add value to their raw materials in order to get more money or even use the raw materials of those who are too uninformed to know the money lost through exporting raw materials while the Africans continue to bleed through this wrong strategy.

The problem of Africa is not lack of forests but lack of factories, hotels, real estate, professional services (e.g medical, financial, etc). UK, for instance, gets Â£5b, through all of us using Heathrow Airport which is an example of a service industry.

Why should somebody travelling to America (North or South) go through London or Paris? Why not use Dakar? Look at the map. He/she does so because there are facilities at Heathrow that are not at Dakar. Previously agricultural land at Heathrow was converted into a modern airport. Those 1,391 acres that Heathrow occupies would not earn the UK Â£5b, if they were still agricultural.

We, therefore, need to balance the needs of preserving the eco-system with the needs for social transformation â€” changing the society from peasant to middle class, skilled working class society. This means that the majority of the people should shift from agriculture to industries and services. Having too many people in agriculture as we do now (82%), is one of the characteristics of backwardness. Countries like UK (population 56m) or USA (population 300m) have got only 2% of their population in agriculture respectively. The rest are in industries or services. Even newly industrialised countries like Taiwan, South Korea, Malaysia, or Thailand, the portions of their populations which are still in agriculture are: 6%, 6.4%, 14.5%, and 49% respectively. This is why their societies are more prosperous than ours. Some of these countries used to produce some agricultural raw materials such as silk, tea, (e.g Japan) or palm oil (e.g Malaysia). Today, they either no longer do so or they are reducing the acreage under those crops. They have converted that land to industries and services. The gap between the industrialised countries and our backward countries, as I have told you many times, is big because industrial products fetch more money than raw materials.

Take the example of our own coffee. A kilogramme of unprocessed coffee will bring US \$1, while that same kg will fetch US \$15 when it is processed in the Nestle factories in UK. Who, then, is aiding who? It is the same story for cotton. Failure to see this, yet we are in leadership of Africa today, is nothing short of treason. Our ignorant traditional chiefs caused our enslavement in the past; ignorant African elite are responsible for our continued enslavement today.

Let us, again, take one other example of employment. Madhvani at Kakira employs about 6,500 persons. Suppose we had 2,000 Madhvanis, we would be able to employ 13m people. The level of unemployment would be much less in Uganda. We would have to import labour from other countries like Japan does. People from other countries would be coming here for kyeyo. Therefore, obstructing investors or demonizing them as the pro-enemy press (The Monitor) is doing is, indeed, an enemy act â€” an act by those that do not want Uganda to transition from backwardness to modernity!

Why, then, use forest lands? This is because there is no free land. Much of the land is occupied by peasants who are engaged in traditional, subsistence farming. Both physically and legally we cannot access this land. However, I have instructed Uganda Investment Authority (UIA) to slowly keep buying land in order to create a Land Bank for this purpose; but this is a slow process. We cannot wait for it. Otherwise, we shall lose opportunities which will be taken up by others. The king of business is the consumer â€” the one who buys from you. If you disappoint him, especially in export markets where there are many competitors, he will never buy from you again. This is why I have been using Government lands to fill this gap. I converted Namanve into an industrial park. When it is finished, it will accommodate about 1,000 factories. One hundred seventy six (176) factories and enterprises have already applied for land there. Namanve will be a satellite town of Kampala. There is already the Coca-Cola factory there, in that area. It is already employing 700 persons. Therefore, these 1,000 factories could employ 700,000 persons. I used part of the prison land at Luzira. Already 17 factories and enterprises have already been allocated that land! What a wastage it was to have 480 acres just being used by convicts to grow sweet potatoes (only 62 acres were given to UIA to allocate to the investors). How much does an acre of sweet potatoes bring in? How much money would the 62 acres of sweet potatoes bring in? How much will the 17 enterprises now going to use the Luzira land going to bring in? How many Ugandans will be employed there? It is the answers to these rhetorical questions that guide my actions.

Then we have got a potential goldmine â€” BIDCO. Uganda imports cooking oil and tallow (for making soap) worth US \$47.7m per year. Palm trees are some of the source for these vegetable oils. The East African market for vegetable oil is worth US \$700m. This chance came to us because Malaysia, on account of industrialisation, no longer has land for growing palm plantations. Palm trees can only grow in lands that receive

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rainfalls of about 2,000 mm per annum. There are only a few areas like that in East Africa including Ssese Islands and Bundibugyo. I could not miss such a chance for my country. I ordered the responsible people to get 6,500 hectares (3,000 hectares was public land under the district and 3,500 was bought by the Government for BIDCO). However, for the factory at Jinja to make profit, they need palm oil from 10,000 hectares of land. The only other land was the forest land nearby. Palm trees are, indeed, a forest. They are trees that both capture carbondioxide from the atmosphere for photosynthesis but also make money for the country and create employment. How can we miss such an opportunity? BIDCO activities have already transformed Kalangala. When I went there last year, people at Bukakata told me that there was now traffic jam at the ferry because of the increased activities. Why should any Ugandan obstruct, harangue or inconvenience such people? What sort of disorientation is this? How can enemies of the future of the people of Uganda be allowed to thrive? Our newspapers such as The Monitor are ever scaring away such investors – such allies of our children’s future. The delays and controversies generated by the enemies of progress and permitted to continue make us lose opportunities.

In respect of Mehta, as you know, he has been producing sugar for Uganda for a long time. Amin destroyed their production in 1972. By destroying our entrepreneurs, Amin destroyed the small nucleus of the modern economy of Uganda. That is how we got into a lot of shortages and got left behind by other countries like South Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, etc. When we came into Government, we brought these entrepreneurs back. Many of them have already attained their 1972 levels and even surpassed them. They are now facing new challenges. One of them is the challenge of competition from China, India and other developing countries. Our industries must be assisted to be competitive by lowering costs of production so that they can sell at lower prices and, therefore, capture international markets. One way of lowering costs is to increase production so that the producer benefits from the economies of large-scale production. For example, once I have used Uganda shillings 20 million to build a dip-tank for my cattle, it will be more economical to dip 2,000 cattle through that facility per week rather than just 100 per week. This is, therefore, the same story with the sugar factories. According to Mehta, in order to be competitive, he should go from his present level of 55,000 tonnes per annum to 110,000 tonnes per annum. In order to do that he needs 1.2m tonnes of sugarcane per annum, which can only be produced on 22,500 hectares of usable land. He now has 10,000 hectares under sugar cane. Therefore, he needs an extra 7,100 hectares from Government; he wants to buy 1,500 hectares from private people and the outgrowers will supply him with 60,000 tonnes of sugarcane. We cannot shift the factory and the present 10,000 hectares of sugarcane. When Mehta brought the proposal of the forest land, I supported the idea without hesitation. I request you to, similarly, support the idea. Why?

First of all, for the reasons I have already enumerated above: employment creation, export earnings or import savings, tax revenues for the Government, etc. In addition, however, by-products of sugar can be used to generate electricity and to make fuel that can be mixed in petroleum as they do in Brazil. Therefore, a sugar cane plantation is also an oilfield like the ones we recently discovered in Lake Albert because they can produce bio-fuel.

However, there are forests we should not compromise about. The forests next to the Lake should never be touched. Some 50-200 metres of forest belt next to the lake should never be touched because it helps to filter the water flowing into the lake so that it does not carry soil silt into the lake. The so-called environmentalists never talk about this. Fifty metres of forest next to river banks should never be touched. That is how soil is washed into the river bed causing silting, for example, in Lake Kyoga, causing swamp grass to swallow the white water (open water) portion. Hills and hill-tops could also be saved to avoid soil erosion. Wetlands should never be touched because these are the water reservoirs for our country; those that have been encroached on should be bought back at attractive prices. We should plant forests on all the bare hills of Rwampara, Ssinga, Kabale, Karamoja, Akokoro, etc. These hills, with a high gradient, are not good for crops. They can, however, be used for certain species of trees: eucalyptus, black wattle (burikoot), carriandra, etc. We shall end up with more forests, more factories, more employment, etc. Some of the opposition and their press are envious of our achievements. They are worried that if we implement what we have planned, they will be marginalised forever. Hence, their opposition. We should not be fooled.

Finally, I would like to unequivocally assert that it is more difficult for a backward country to guard against environmental degradation than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Why? It is because of the following reasons:

The Government has no money to police and protect the environment;

There are too many people, in primitive agriculture who, in the process, destroy the environment using wrong techniques and implements;

Without electricity, the population uses firewood, thereby destroying the bio-mass.

Therefore, industrialisation is a sine qua non of protecting the environment. There are some who do not protect the environment even after industrialisation. That is not

because of lack of means but because of greed which is a different problem. In our case, the environment (especially the forests and the bio-mass) are being destroyed because of lack of industrialisation and the attendant social transformation. Europeans and the Americans are destroying the environment because of greed; we are destroying the environment, involuntarily, because of poverty, lack of employment, lack of electricity, etc.

The Banyankole say: "okandide ehweyo achumita omukira" the one who wants the whole animal to expose itself for better targeting ends up only injuring the tail of the animal and not killing it. Even the English say: "procrastination is the thief to time". Mistakes by the Sixth Parliament caused the present power shortage. The mistake of the so-called donors in constraining our defence expenditure (limiting it, arbitrarily, to 2% of GDP) caused the prolonging of the Kony war until 2002, when we firmly rejected their meddling that is how we defeated Kony and we are now ending the cattle-rustling in Karamoja. I request you to support our move on these limited portions of our forest reserves that are not part of the core ecosystems, mentioned above (next to rivers, next to lake shores, wetlands, forests on mountain tops, etc), that must be preserved at all costs.

The writer is the President of the Republic of Uganda



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