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MENU

Mukwano fights herdsmen for land

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A LAND dispute has erupted between Mukwano Enterprises and herdsmen in Masindi district following attempts by the company to evict them from the former Kiryana ranch land.

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By Pascal Kwesiga

A LAND dispute has erupted between Mukwano Enterprises and herdsmen in Masindi district following attempts by the company to evict them from the former Kiryana ranch land.

Mukwano claims that the herdsmen, who relocated from Kiboga and Nakasongola districts in 2003, encroached on its 62sq mile land, which it acquired from Ziiwa Ranchers recently. The ranch belonged to Capt. Charles Roy.

Kiryana ranch belonged to the Government before it was leased out to Roy in 2004.

The herdsmen, who say they are over 6,000, said on Monday that Mukwano wants to evict them from the six villages neighbouring the ranch on Masindi-Kafu road in Kimengo sub-county. The villages are Kididima, Karangwe, Kayera, Karwara, Nyakarongo and Kizinga.

The pastoralists accuse Mukwano employees of detaining and beating them up whenever they find them grazing in the disputed land, which they said they have occupied for over 20 years.

They have threatened to sue the company, saying it impounded and sold off over 1,000 head of cattle in an attempt to evict them.

Pastor Garsom Katongole of Kimengo Church of God accused Mukwano of torching their huts.

He said the company workers impounded their animals, saying they had a court order from Masindi High Court after the pastoralists lost a case of trespass to Mukwano.

Karangwe LC1 chairman Rajab Byaruhanga accused other local leaders of conniving with Mukwano to evict them.

â€œThey (Mukwano) have bribed the leaders and the Police. They are beating us up and have torched our huts twice since last year,â€ he said.
â€œThey came to us with court papers saying we had lost a case to Mukwano and started loading our animals on trucks but we have never been in court with the company. They were in court with a group of 43 people who were led by Sam Lubega,â€ he explained.

But Kimengo LC3 chairman, Sam Butera, refuted reports that Mukwano wants to evict residents in the six villages.

â€œI have not heard about that threat. The people who are going to be evicted are those who have occupied the companyâ€™s land and are grazing their animals on it illegally,â€ he said.

Butera also denied allegations that over 1,000 head of cattle were sold off.

â€œThe cows I saw were only 500 and Mukwano had a court order which I could not stop them from executing. The affected people lost a case of trespass in 2009 and were ordered to pay sh21m but they failed,â€ he added.

The manager of Ziiwa Ranchers, Moses Kigongo, added that the exercise to attach 500 head of cattle was stopped by the commandant of the Police land protection unit.

â€œThe 500 animals that had been attached were returned to them in the presence of their leaders.â€

Butera explained that the cause of the dispute was access to River Kafu the main water source for the animals. He said corridors should be created to enable the herdsmen access the river without trespassing on the disputed land.

â€œThere is no permanent source of water apart from Kafu which can only be accessed through the disputed land,â€ Butera added.

The ranch manager, Kigongo, said the matter was being exaggerated by politicians to incite the herdsmen against the investor. He named a UPDF officer and other government officials as among those inciting the herdsmen not to quit before they are compensated.

â€œThe encroachers are being mobilised to blackmail the investor by their relatives and politicians who want their votes in 2011. They are telling them to move further into the ranch and demand compensation from Mukwano,â€ Kigongo said.

He accused the pastoralists of destroying some facilities on the ranch such as dams and cattle dips.

Kigongo also said the herdsmen first acquired some pieces of land along the ranch before they encroached on it.

â€œWe are under obligation to protect the land of the investor and these pastoralists should be out of this land by the year end. The pastoralists are not 6,000 as they claim. They are less than 100 but the number is going up because many are still coming,â€ Kigongo said.

He said Mukwano has given the pastoralists up to the end of this year to leave to allow the company set up a modern dairy farm within two years.

â€œWe have already bought 3,000 exotic and beef cows from Kenya and they will be here soon,â€ Kigongo said.

He disclosed that the company will also grow cash crops.

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