

Ugandan forest villagers still waiting for the 'promised land'

Nicky Milne / Wednesday 21 September : 13:09



Children play in the Bukaleba Forest Reserve, Uganda in June 2016. Photo: Nicky Milne

Our exclusive new film "Green: at what price?" tells the story of forest inhabitants fighting a reforestation project for formal rights to land

Deep within a pine and eucalyptus forest on the shores of Lake Victoria in southern Uganda, a parcel of land is pitting a Norwegian timber company against more than 10,000 villagers who say its "green" project is costing their homes and livelihood.

The land in dispute is 500 hectares within an area of about 6,500 hectares in the Bukaleba Forest Reserve, leased for 50 years in 1996 by Uganda's government to privately-owned Green Resources, one of Africa's largest forest companies.

Green Resources, whose 2,500-strong workforce has planted 41,000 hectares of forest in Uganda, Mozambique, and Tanzania, said it was proud of its environmental credentials, harvesting logs used across East Africa and selling into the carbon credit market.

Located 120 km (75 miles) from both the capital, Kampala, and the Kenyan border, the plantation at Bukaleba is in an ideal spot for wood production for use both in Uganda and for export.

But rather than being welcomed by the local community, the Ugandan project stands accused of evicting villagers who have lived on the land for generations and depriving them of livelihoods by taking land used to grow food or graze livestock.

"When we first arrived here, life was comfortable. We were farming and harvesting enough food, but those things are no more," said Olga Akello, who has lived in the Bukaleba forest for over 30 years.



WATCH: Our new film investigating the Bukaleba Forest Reserve "Green: at what price?"

"They took away our farmland and we have become beggars."

To appease villagers, President Yoweri Museveni pledged to allocate them 500 hectares of the leased land but this "promised land" has yet to materialise, setting communities against the

company in a complex land dispute echoed across Africa.

Green Resources Director Teddy Nyamaizi Nsamba said this was a matter for the government to resolve as it was not within the company's mandate to hand over this land.

The company is proud of its efforts to help the communities, she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation in an interview at Green Resources offices in Jinja, Uganda's second city.

Its website refers to benefits including creating jobs, supplying medical equipment to health centres, drilling bore holes for water, sponsoring girls through secondary education, and running HIV/AIDS awareness activities.

UNCERTAIN FUTURE

Bukaleba's villagers are among millions facing an uncertain future across Africa, where 50 million hectares of land are leased to foreign entities and 90 percent of rural land is untitled, according to a report by the Oakland Institute, in California.

Ugandan Central Forest Reserves are managed by the National Forest Authority (NFA) and are considered protected areas, but thousands of people were brought to live and work in the Bukaleba area by Idi Amin's government in the 1970s.

Under complex laws, those who occupied the land for 12 years before the 1995 Constitution came into force, or who had been settled on the land by the government, do have "Bona Fide" land rights, but many are unaware of the laws that protect them.

David Arach, East Africa programme officer at NAMATI, which trains grassroots legal advocates to work with poor communities, said as customary laws are mainly oral in Uganda - proof of ownership and documentation are understandably onerous - the law treats customary tenure as equal to other tenure systems.

If a compulsory acquisition of villagers' land occurred, a fair market price for the land should have been negotiated based on a willing buyer/seller model, Arach said.

"The rights of the people in Bukaleba should have been respected," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "Questions on how the community benefits from the initiative should have been considered in the first place."

Jessika Nait, who was born in the area in 1972, said her family used to grow all its food on four hectares of land which she said her father had bought. Since that land was leased to Green Resources, she has struggled to feed her children.



Jessika Nait is pictured in Bukalaba Forest Reserve, Uganda in June 2016. Photo: Nicky Milne

She said evictions have intensified since Green Resources leased the land from the NFA.

"They brought a truckload of soldiers to chase people from the forest, they were shooting people and they burned down houses," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Another villager, James Maaka, who has lived in Bukaleba for almost 30 years, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation that he and his two sons were attacked as they dug their garden.

His oldest son, Muwanguzi, said he had suffered a head injury in the attack and still has headaches.

"They grabbed father and caned us repeatedly. I was cut and blood started gushing out," Muwanguzi said. "Since Green Resources came here, we have had no peace."

Nsamba said Green Resources had not evicted villagers.

"All evictions have been done by the National Forest Authority," she said.

GLIMMER OF HOPE

Nsamba said the company had found the land in Bukaleba in a degraded state and was working to restore the environment.

"Ninety percent of labour is coming from the communities and that gives a livelihood to these communities that helps parents take their children to school, to build better shelter, to plan for their lives, because they have an income," she said.

Gilbert Gadillo, spokesman for the NFA, said the government depends on foreign investment as it lacks resources to invest in new plantations to expand forest reserves to meet rising demand.



Bukaleba village chairman Ongom Alfonse reads the letter he received from Ugandan President Museveni in 2011 promising his community land in the Bukalaba Forest Reserve, Uganda in June 2016. Photo: Nicky Milne

He acknowledged that the NFA had carried out evictions in Bukaleba, after it conducted what he called "community sensitisation", whereby residents are informed more about their situation before being removed from the forest reserves.

"This is to help them make informed choices, including voluntary evacuation. Only after that has failed is there recourse to evictions," Gadillo said. Meanwhile, for villagers living in the forest, the 500 hectares remains a glimmer of hope in a bureaucratic quagmire as they lack land titles and recourse to the legal system.

Gadillo confirmed that the "matter" of the 500 hectares is "before the Cabinet of Uganda, pending guidance".

Village chairman Ongom Alfonse, who has lived in the area for over 20 years, is still clinging to

hope that the 500 hectares will be allocated to the community.

At his home, he unlocked a box containing the letter he had received from Museveni in 2011, and read out the proclamation earmarking 500 hectares for the community.

Since then, however, nothing has happened and he believes Green Resources is now growing trees on the land because it has not been properly demarcated.

"Sometimes we eat once a day here now at Bukaleba. We want to share the forest, because we have nowhere else to go," he said. "We are just here stranded."



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