
[Uganda: Fighting for the Mabira Forest and final success!](#)

Uganda has witnessed growing protests in recent weeks over government plans to give over 7,100 hectares of Mabira Forest, a nature reserve since 1932, to SCOUTS for sugarcane growing. Razing the forest could devastate a fragile environment, sparking soil erosion, drying up the climate and removing a buffer against pollution for Lake Victoria. Technical, professional and expert advice against the project as well as public protests culminated in the resignation of the Board and senior technical staff of the National Forestry Authority (NFA). The new Board, appointed in December, 2006, is in the process of approving more forest give-aways for commercial purposes such as Kitubulu in Entebbe, Buyaga (Lyantonde), Mpanga (Fort Portal), Nebbi, Arua, Ntungamo, Kitgum and Bobi, among others.

Ugandans living near the Mabira Forest fear collapse of their way of life. "It is everything: firewood, charcoal, herbal medicine, edible fruits, timber, it catches rain and fills rivers. We cannot live without it," said Haruna Salongo, 48.

"Mabira Forest is part of our heritage and our children's future. Mabira Forest is a tropical hardwood forest which is proposed to be cut down for the production of sugar in Uganda. The forest is one of the most biodiverse forests remaining in Africa. It also has added value for the communities that inhabit it and surround it. The value of the forest to Uganda and her people is beyond the values of the trees, but it is also a frequented tourism site for birdwatching, forest walks, and other activities; it has cultural and historical values; it significantly impacts the environment as a natural water filtration system and a natural regulator of global climate", expressed members of the Save Mabira Crusade (SMC), a network of several individuals, NGOs, civic leaders, religious, cultural and academic institutions, political organisations and local communities that have come together in a bid to stop the proposed give-away of Mabira and other forest reserves in Uganda.

As opposition to the sugar plantation grew, with the local press saying 80 percent of parliamentarians would vote against it, President Museveni has dug his heels in. "Increased sugar production would boost jobs, export earnings and tax revenue - essential if Uganda is to 'have money to police and protect the environment'", Mr Museveni says. Mabira residents are sceptical of promises of jobs, alluding to the people of Bugala Island on Lake Victoria, who were persuaded to give part of their pristine rainforest to a private Kenyan palm oil company, Bidco, last year. Bidco planted 4,000 hectares of palm, mostly on land covered in forest that the company bulldozed, locals say. The state agreed to give Bidco 2,000 more hectares of forest land by lifting the protected status of a nature reserve, but this has been held up by public outcry. Residents say they lost vital resources like wood, medicines, fresh water, yet saw no employment or money.

"They promised a lot of things," said Joyce Nakirijja, 70, sitting in her farmyard on Bugala surrounded by banana plants. "Our grandchildren would have jobs and they would build new roads, schools and hospitals. It was a lie; we have dirt roads and the company imports workers from the mainland." Another problem, she said, was that monkeys rendered homeless by deforestation were raiding local crops.

On 12th May 2007 the leaders of SMC organized a demonstration against Mabira Forest Give-away. The demonstration which was supposed to be peaceful turned chaotic and five lives were lost, some property was destroyed, some people were injured and many of the leaders were arrested and detained after the demonstration. They are now facing various charges in the courts of law ranging from murder to participation in an “unlawful demonstration” – though the police had cleared the demonstration and given it a go-ahead. They will appear in court to answer charges against them on the 28th June and 26 July.

However, after so much pain there is good news! The Government of Uganda has announced on May 22 the drop of its intention to giving away the Mabira Central Forest Reserves for commercial sugar cane growing.

The struggle of the Ugandan people has rendered fruits for them and those to come.

Article based on: “Legal Questions Over Plan to Give Away Mabira Forest”, “Save Mabira Forest in Uganda”, “Mabira Forest Crusade – Court”, “Uganda Govt. Gives up Mabira Sale!”, NAPE, <http://www.nape.or.ug/>