

THE TRADERS CUTTING TREES IN UGANDA CLAIM THAT THE Uganda loses billions in

Uganda's most valuable trees known as Afzelia Africana or globally referred to as African mahogany are on the brink of extinction following smuggling of logs perpetuated by highly placed officials. Gerald Tenywa unearths the state of affairs

Hardwood is on voracious demand in Asian countries, including China and it is prized for making luxury furniture, gun butts and for ship building.

Although the Government has made efforts to stop the illegal trade in the logs, some corrupt officials are weaving through the multi-million dollar trade.

The timber kingpins harvest the logs from forests in northern Uganda and West Nile, where only stumps are visible now. Trees are being felled at an alarming rate.

Bribery claims

Investigations by *Sunday Vision* reveal a syndicate, where district forestry officials connive with top government and security personnel to facilitate the trade.

"There are district officials who have turned cutting and selling Afzelia into their business," says a source, adding that law enforcement officers have become part of the racket for a fee.

Cited in the racket are officials working with Police, the Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF), National Forestry Authority (NFA) and State House.

A dealer who spoke to *Sunday Vision* said they offer hefty bribes of between sh3m and sh10m to security agents as they move the logs from northern Uganda to Kampala.

Sources say even where the logs have been impounded and kept at Police stations, the consignment is released following orders from government officials or after payment of bribes.

Recently, an operations

commander in Maracha district claimed timber which had been impounded by NFA and the Police, but the latter declined to hand over the timber to him. He later sought intervention from court in Arua, which ordered the two parties to release the timber.

Other sources at NFA said they had to release impounded logs from their headquarters following threats from operatives working for a retired UPDF general.

In June, Robert Owiny, who is the range manager of NFA in West Nile, says he received calls threatening him with death if he did not release a trailer with timber which had been impounded in Koboko district.

False declarations

The Uganda Revenue Authority (URA) officials at Oraba border post in Koboko, according to Bob Kazungu, a senior forest officer at the Forestry Support Services Department, have been clearing logs erroneously.

He says most of the logs being cut in Uganda are declared as logs from South Sudan. "We have complained to URA about this, but they have not stopped," Kazungu says.

Motorists plying the Kampala-Jinja road constantly meet trailers loaded with huge logs as they block traffic at Kazinga near Bweyogerere.

The trailers head to an expansive warehouse, where the logs are loaded into containers. The logs are then transported to Uganda's border towns of Busia and Malaba for export to different Asian countries.

When *Sunday Vision* visited

Mahogany smuggled to Asia

● Four containers (159,000kgs) of mahogany have been exported out of the country since January

● **NAMANVE INDUSTRIAL PARK:** More than 30 containers are dispatched everyday by three warehouses to Malaba and Busia for export

● There are also warehouses at Kisaasi, Ntinda and Nakawa Industrial Area in Kampala

● **AT MALABA BORDER:** 100 - 150 containers of mahogany are cleared every month for export

● Logs are also transported by railway to Mombasa through Tororo

two warehouses near Mandela Stadium, Namboole, several men were seen offloading the unprocessed logs and loading them into shipping containers with the help of a huge crane.

This is reportedly done under the watchful eye of the Asian 'investors'.

At the Namanve warehouse on the Kampala-Jinja Highway, trailers carrying the containers, with the logs could be seen exiting the complex, enroute to Malaba and Busia.

"I have always seen the logs loaded into containers but where do they go?" John Bosco Sebutooke, a bodaboda rider in Kampala asks.

His concerns are shared by many people in northern Uganda, where the precious trees have been harvested for the last six years by unscrupulous timber merchants.

"What annoys me is that we have trees of more than 100 years that are being felled in northern Uganda for as little as sh10,000. We are losing our heritage for a song," Peter Achan, a resident of Gulu in northern Uganda, says.

URA records

Records at URA seen by *Sunday Vision* show that only four containers of African mahogany have been exported out of the country since January this year. *Sunday Vision* was not able to get figures from previous shipments.



A logistics expert at a warehouse in Namanve Industrial Park, who preferred anonymity, explains that every container shipped out of the country carries 40,000kgs of logs of mahogany.

URA spokesperson Vincent Seruma confirmed that only four containers have been exported this year.

He described the mahogany as a restricted tree species, meaning that permission has to be secured from the environment ministry.

"It does not mean you cannot export mahogany, but you have to seek permission," Seruma says.

He adds that he was not aware of the ban imposed on African mahogany.

He explained that the logs seen in some parts of the country are classified as on transit from either the DR Congo or South Sudan.

The logs are first stored and then exported to countries in Asia, including China and

India and also Kenya. Some people doubt the URA figures arguing that there could be under declaration of volumes to dodge taxes and weaken regulations that curtail trade in African mahogany.

"I cannot imagine that only four containers of logs have been exported from Uganda this year. It is a shame that people are stripping the country of mahogany and the country is getting nothing in return," Paul Musisi, a resident of Namanve, says.

150 containers cleared

Sunday Vision saw several containers being loaded with mahogany at more than 10 warehouses in Kampala.

At Namanve Industrial Park in Kampala, more than 30 containers loaded with Afzelia Africana are dispatched everyday by three warehouses to Malaba and Busia for export. There are also warehouses at Kisaasi, Ntinda and Nakawa Industrial Area in Kampala.

Many logs harvested from different parts of West Nile and northern Uganda were seen being ferried to different warehouses in Kampala, where they are reshaped and loaded onto containers for export.

Sources at Malaba border, that preferred anonymity, explained that between 100 and 150 containers of mahogany are cleared every month for export. More

containers are transported via Busia border. Apart from the logs transported by road, mahogany logs are also transported by railway to Mombasa through Tororo.

URA to investigate

On the allegations that URA officials were aiding the traders by providing them documents, which they use to claim that their timber is in transit from neighbouring countries, Seruma said they were going to investigate.

"I cannot confirm or deny, but we are going to investigate this matter," he said, adding that they cannot act basing on allegations.

How big is the problem?

Although trade in the logs of Afzelia Africana started six years ago, it has intensified in the last two years.

This has almost wiped out Afzelia African trees from private land, according to Stephen Galima, the natural forest manager at the National Forestry Authority.

After the near depletion of trees on private land, scarcity is driving hunters of one of the most valuable trees into invasion of Government protected forests.

Galima cites Koboko, Yumbe, Adjumani, Gulu, Pader, Apac, Kitgum and Lamwo in northern Uganda as some of the areas where the trees on private land have been depleted.

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illegal timber export



A truck loaded with logs

He says the plunders have also depleted Zoka, Ucheri, Kilak and Aswa River forests. Robert Owiny, the range manager at the National Forestry Authority in West Nile, says illegal loggers are eyeing Afzelia Africana in Mt. Kei where it still exists abundantly. He says riverine forests (the catchment of the rivers and streams), which are sheltered by Afzelia Africana, have been the worst affected areas.

Government ban

Three decades ago, Prof. George Kanyeihamba, while serving as minister of trade and industry, imposed a ban on export of raw timber.

The ban was later upheld by the National Forestry and Tree Planting Act of 2003, which also prohibits export of raw timber.

Last year, Environment minister Sam Cheptoris imposed a ban on harvesting and export of valuable trees such as Afzelia Africana and Sheanut butter.

Nine months into the ban, the tree species is still being exported out of Uganda.

In the last three months, two regional meetings were convened in Arua and Gulu to remind the district officials, security agencies and conservation agencies to enforce the ban.

This was followed by

operations in which trucks carrying Afzelia Africana logs were impounded in different parts of West Nile and Gulu. Although the rate of cutting the trees has drastically reduced, challenges remain.

"The logs that used to be ferried out of West Nile have reduced, but traders still take them," according to a source. "How come the warehouses are still loading the logs for export?" observes a source who did not want to be named.

Enforcement frustrated

Weaknesses in the prosecution and court sentences that are not deterrent have been

cited as responsible for the smuggling.

"Even when we arrest the suspects, we are not the ones who prosecute," Owiny says. "The suspects are fined, but this is little compared to the value of the logs.

The logs, there after are handed to them to proceed to Kampala for export," Owiny says. "Court usually imposes a fine of sh300,000 and in addition, the truck, together with the logs are handed over to the owners," he says.

As a way out, there is need for strong institutions in order to shield the forests from plunder. The local governments that are giving

away the hardwood through permits are supposed to be supervised by the Forestry Support Services Department (FSSD) which was established by the law. But FSSD is weak in capacity.

The districts are hungry for resources and they have turned timber and charcoal into revenue sources.

Consequently, the districts are more interested in money than preservation of the trees.

Illegal logging

The trade in Afzelia africana has put Uganda, the DR Congo and South Sudan at loggerheads. They keep on trading accusations over the

illegal timber trade.

While Uganda put a ban on the export of raw timber, including Afzelia Africana last year, the ban has been violated. The traders cut the trees in Uganda and then claim that the logs are coming from South Sudan or the DR Congo.

Recently, Ugandan officials organised a meeting with their counterparts in South Sudan, according to Kazungu.

"The South Sudanese authorities told us that they had put a ban on harvesting of native trees," Kazungu said.

The South Sudanese delegation blacklisted Oraba border post in Koboko where logs from South Sudan get transported to Uganda on their way to China. However, the South Sudanese rebels said they hold most of West Nile and northern Uganda and that they will continue exporting the logs through Oraba.

South Sudanese rebels have also occupied part of Uganda's Mt. Kei forest reserve.

Owiny points out that some of the areas of the reserve cannot be accessed by managers of the forests.

The Sudanese rebels, led by Riek Machar, former vice-president and Salva Kiir, the President of South Sudan, last month entered into an agreement to end the five-year civil war.

Loggers stopped

There is no harvesting of Afzelia Africana in the protected areas under the NFA, according to the executive director of the forestry body in Uganda.

Tom Okello describes Afzelia Africana as a reserved tree species, which is protected under the National Tree Planting Act, 2003.

"We have encountered people who sneak in with the logs and when we check we find export permits from South Sudan," Okello says.

"We have managed to stop the cutting of the trees in the central forest reserves, but the trees on community and private land are being cut down. The trees on private land are yours, but to cut them, you must have a permit," he adds. "Let us not think about exploiting trees for revenue. We are not mindful of sustainable yield level meaning that what we are cutting and not replacing," Okello explains.

WHAT IS AT STAKE?

For every tree that is cut down, the landowners earn between sh10,000 to sh50,000, but the logs fetch up to \$50,000 (about sh200m) when they get to China, according to sources. "It is unbelievable that a tree species that is needed for making expensive furniture, ships and gun butts can be cut down in exchange for very little money," Gaster Kiyingi, an environmental activist, says.

Three decades ago, Prof. George Kanyeihamba, the then minister of trade and industry, imposed a ban on export of raw timber. This, according to Kiyingi, would have ended exploitation of Uganda's tree wealth.

The spirit behind the ban imposed by Kanyeihamba was to promote value-addition before the timber is exported. "It is ridiculous to export raw materials cheaply and import furniture from China expensively," Kiyingi says.

"We are losing foreign exchange by buying expensive furniture made from some of the timber we have sold cheaply," he adds.

Sources told *Sunday Vision* that Uganda is losing revenue because most of the logs sourced from Uganda are falsely declared as coming from the DR Congo and South Sudan.

This means that Uganda does not levy taxes, according to Charles Byaruhanga, who heads the Forest Sector Support Department in the environment ministry.

African mahogany

After decades of planting exotic tree species, such as eucalyptus and pine, NFA has raised indigenous trees for restoration of its degraded forests and encouraging people to plant on their land.

According to Okello, the response to the tree planting drive during the current rainy season has been positive in parts of central, eastern and western Uganda where indigenous tree seedlings are being distributed.

"We are working around the clock to start raising seedlings of Afzelia Africana so that we encourage people to plant," Okello says.

Experts warn that if no action is taken to stop the plundering, the Afzelia Africana will soon be wiped out.

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What should be done?

Experts say there is need for Government to stop the illegal harvesting of trees.

"The war cannot be won by a mere patrol man, what are the Police along the road and the enforcement team in Kampala doing?" Robert Owiny, the range manager at National Forestry Authority in West Nile, asked.

"The dealers in the logs say the only problem is you (Owiny) in Arua and after they have left West Nile, they will move safely to the warehouses in Kampala," he says.

Owiny observes that illegal logging has persisted because some district officials had turned this into a business.

He points out that managing trees on private land is not the mandate of the National

Forestry Authority. Kazungu concedes that corruption within the district forestry officials has become a big problem. "We have got some complaints about some errant district forestry officers, but our hands are tied," he says.

"The district forestry officials are hired by districts and can only be fired by local government," he adds.

Onesimus Mugenyi, the deputy director at Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment, points out that the district forestry services have been starved in terms of funding and cannot deliver on their mandate.

He also says that districts have turned harvesting of protected species into a revenue resource.