

GOVT Urge Ugandans To Support Restoration Of Wetlands

By Noel Muhangi

President Yoweri Museveni has urged all Ugandans who encroached on wetlands to vacate immediately and play a role in the restoration process. Museveni's message was read by the Rt. Hon. Prime Minister Dr. Ruhakana-Rugunda on Saturday at Limoto primary school grounds, Pallisa district, while officiating at this year's celebrations for World Wetlands Day. Dr. Ruhakana Rugunda was joined by key stakeholders in the environment sector who included; United Nations Resident Coordinator Rosa Malango, UNDP Resident Representative Almaz Gebru, State Minister for Environment Hon. Dr. Mary Goretti Kitutu, Ministry of Water and Environment officials, Executive Director Uganda National Meteorological Authority and NWSC officials. Other key people that graced the celebrations were Members of Parliament, LCS Chairpersons and Resident District Commissioners.

Before the Prime Minister read the President's speech, he revealed how H.E Yoweri Museveni had loved to physically attend the celebrations but had to attend the East African Community annual Summit in Arusha, Tanzania. In case you missed the function, below we reproduce President Yoweri Museveni's speech as read by Rt. Hon. Prime Minister Dr. RuhakanaRugunda.

"World Wetlands Day is important because it is a platform through which to raise awareness on the importance of wetland values and benefits. It is also important fostering political action and empowering different stakeholders to become game changers. In recent years, it has become a medium through which to prioritize the development of interventions that protect against the effects of climate change. I would like to congratulate Pallisa District Local Government Leadership for accepting to host the National celebrations to mark this day. This year's theme "Wetlands and Climate Change", is appropriate given the extreme weather conditions and natural disasters we have experienced in recent years. Some of these disasters arise out of degradation of these fragile ecosystems. Wetlands are important because they perform a number of functions such as; water storage, groundwater recharge, storm protection, flood mitigation, and



Rt. Hon. Prime Minister Dr. Ruhakana Rugunda is joined by other guests to cut a tape at the celebrations of World Wetlands Day in Limoto village. He represented the president.



UN Resident Coordinator Rosa Malango (L), UNDP Resident Representative Almaz Gebru (2nd L), Prime Minister Hon. Dr. Ruhakana Rugunda, were impressed with benefits of Alternative Livelihoods

shoreline stabilization. They also help in erosion control and retention of carbon, nutrients, sediments and pollutants. Wetlands also produce goods such as clean water, fisheries, timber, wildlife resources, medicinal herbs and tourism opportunities. The continued loss and degradation of wetlands is therefore a matter of concern not only in the context of livelihoods, but also in mitigating climate change impacts. Factors such as increased demand for agricultural land, settlement, and infrastructure development are some of the greatest challenges to the conservation of wetlands. I have also noted that at times, misguided people carry out developments in wetlands. We need to

educate them so that they can stop. In this way, we can all continue to enjoy the many benefits wetlands provide us. Well-managed wetlands make communities resilient to extreme weather events and disasters such as prolonged drought and incidences of water scarcity. I am indeed concerned about the rapid loss of wetlands, particularly in and around urban centres, and in areas like Busoga, Tororo, Kigezi, and especially in places like Pallisa where rice growing is common. In 2016, after realizing this, I personally started a campaign to mobilise at least 500 million dollars for wetland management. My effort has so far yielded 24 million dollars from the Green Climate Fund. Govern-

ment of Uganda and UNDP are contributing 18 million dollars and 2 million dollars respectively as counterpart funding. I have described the valuable services that wetlands provide, and how these are being threatened. As we celebrate World Wetlands Day today, we need to reflect on what each one of us can either individually or collectively do to conserve our wetlands. **First:** We need to secure the boundaries of our wetlands and also gazette and strictly protect those that provide critical functions that avert climate change impacts. **Two:** We need to explore setting up Environmental Courts that effectively deal with impunity, and at the same time establish a separate law

for wetlands.

Three: We need to restore wetlands and associated catchments that have been degraded.

Four: We need to ensure that due diligence is done before issuance of User Permits, as well as ensuring that audits are periodically done to monitor compliance to the Conditions therein. Five and finally: We need to remove pressure from wetlands by creating alternative livelihood options that are economically viable. I wish to draw your attention to the pivotal role Local Governments play in conserving our wetlands and other natural resources. In order to effectively exercise this, they must stop issuing land titles in wetlands and forests. Instead, we should ensure that wetlands and other natural resources are sustainably used, and that the law is enforced without fear or favour. Let me take this opportunity to appreciate the support provided by our Development Partners, and specifically the United Nations System for the support and commitment to the restoration of all critical wetlands in the country.

I wish you happy World Wetlands Day celebrations. **THANK YOU ALL,** reads part of President Yoweri Museveni's speech. UN Resident Coordinator, Ms. Rosa Malango, also addressed the gathering at Limoto grounds. In her speech, Ms. Malango said that this year's theme was timely, thus highlights the

role played by wetlands, as natural solutions, in adapting to, and mitigating the impact of climate change. She further said that the national economy, human health and natural ecosystems are also facing one of the most pressing problems; climate change whose negative effects are already here with us. Wetlands have not been spared. Ms. Malango added that scientists estimate that 64% of the world's wetlands have disappeared since 1990. "In Uganda, the national wetlands area has reduced from 15.6% in 1994 to 8.9% in 2018. These trends indicate the country's increased risk and vulnerability to natural disasters such as floods and drought," said Ms. Malango. She further stated that an attack on wetlands is an attack on our common heritage and this should inspire all of us to protect our common heritage from extinction. "SDG 13 enjoins us to take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts. Achieving this requires our collective action. We should all say NO to wetland encroachment. We can start by planting a tree to celebrate childbirth, marriage, key anniversaries and in memory of the dead." Ms. Malango stated. The State Minister for Environment, Hon. Dr. Mary Goretti Kitutu, earlier had warned Ugandans to stop cutting trees, destroying wetlands and the environment. Hon. Kitutu hailed President Yoweri Museveni for the Presidential Initiative on restoration of the environment. Hon. Kitutulater invited the Prime Minister and the UN chiefs to hand over awards to people who were preserving the environment. The first award was handed over to the former mayor of Pallisa Town Council, John OkuOpolot, for conserving 6 acres of wetlands. The Ugandan award was handed over to EunoBenard who was identified for sensitizing the people of Ngora district. The third award was won by LimotoYouth Farmers Association for using modern farming practices like pumping water for irrigation.