

Media briefing

Uganda: ongoing attacks against indigenous communities, in the context of a World-Bank funded conservation project

In August 2021, in the Tooro Semuliki Wildlife Reserve in Western Uganda, three men were attacked by game reserve rangers and have since disappeared. It is not clear if they were arrested or killed and then dumped in. This attack, unfortunately, is not an isolated case. Since the creation of the natural reserve, Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) rangers - with the pretext of protecting wildlife - have been threatening, unlawfully evicting, violently attacking and even killing local indigenous people.

The situation has been escalating in recent months. According to data gathered by a local NGO, since the beginning of 2021 UWA rangers have been involved in 91 physical or verbal attacks against grassroots human rights defenders and local community members who were peacefully defending their land rights. Over 30,000 indigenous people continue to remain homeless or lack access to cultivable land because the National Park Authorities do not allow them access to their land.

Despite this long-standing, violent land conflict and serious allegations of human rights abuses perpetrated by the UWA, in 2021 the World Bank approved a forest management project, financed by the Swedish International Development Agency. The project will provide further funds for activities such as forest monitoring and patrolling, that have been linked to violations and reprisals against the local indigenous community and that risk to further exacerbate the ongoing conflict.

National and international organizations have raised their concerns with the World Bank, demanding respect and protection of the rights of the local indigenous communities. However, the Bank has been shirking its responsibility and so far has not taken any meaningful action to condemn retaliations and to ensure the rights of the people impacted by its project are protected.

A long history of human rights violations

Local communities living in the Tooro Semuliki Wildlife Reserve were originally displaced by the Allied Democratic Force rebels in 1998. They returned six years later. By that time, the Ugandan government had designated the area as a wildlife reserve.

In 2016, with the support of Ugandan organization Twerwaneho Listeners Club, the community took legal action to have their land rights recognized. Following this action in court, however, the conflict escalated. Since then, there have been numerous extra-judicial killings, forceful

evictions, extortions, arrests, denial of access to communal resources within the park, and threats against the activists peacefully struggling for the rights of their communities.

Since January 2021, TLC has recorded the following attacks:

- 27 people have been arrested and detained inside the reserve and set free upon paying ransoms;
- 12 people have been arrested and released unconditionally;
- 16 people have been murdered; 9 dead bodies were not recovered after family members failed to pay ransoms; 4 of them were dragged from their farmland and taken deep inside the park before being murdered;
- 12 instances of extortion involving game rangers on duty to secure the project;
- 15 individuals beaten up when they attempted to access their farmlands;
- 9 instances where community members were stopped from meeting to organize against unlawful evictions. Sometimes tear gas was used, leaders were arrested and local authorities acting in interest of the implementing agencies stopped the meetings.

The World Bank and SIDA's involvement

In May 2021, the World Bank approved a US\$ [2.70 million project](#), with financing from the Sweden International Development Association. The implementing agencies are the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) and the National Forestry Authority (NFA).

The project, “Securing Uganda’s Natural Resource Base in Protected Areas Project”, affects three areas:

- Queen Elizabeth National Park
- Toro-Semliki Wildlife Reserve
- Murchison Falls Protected Area

According to the project documents, the project’s objective is to “improve sustainable management of, and increase benefits to communities from, target protected areas in response to COVID-19 impacts” and “the project will support participatory forest protection, forest monitoring, and forest restoration activities”.

Any World Bank project requires a Stakeholder Engagement Plan (SEP) and should respect the Bank's [environmental and social safeguards](#). However, the SEP was conducted by the same agencies accused of abuses and it was neither conclusive nor sufficient as many key stakeholders and rights holders were not consulted. In the SEP documents, there is no mention of the ongoing land conflict and the fact that local indigenous communities depend on this land for their livelihoods and to access their sacred sites. To carry out the SEP, the Government representatives selectively consulted only their allies and people favorable to the project.

The World Bank, moreover, failed to conduct proper human rights due diligence. As detailed below, their beneficiary (UWA) has a long history of human rights abuses. Yet, the Bank failed to take adequate measures to prevent the risk of retaliation against local community members opposing the project and failed to implement their own [commitments against reprisals](#).

Further allegations of human rights violations committed by UWA

- In the area of Mt. Elgon National Park, the [Benet indigenous people](#), have been repeatedly evicted and continue to suffer from gross human rights violations at the hands of the UWA. Rangers have allegedly arrested, raped, shot, and beaten into comas many members of the Benet community for “trespassing” on their ancestral lands.
- Since 3 January 2021, UWA rangers have been carrying out forced evictions of communities in the [Apa area](#) in northern Uganda. They have burnt homes, looted property and attacked community members. Hundreds of people have been rendered homeless, while several others remain at risk of forced evictions.
- Attacks and killings against the local community in [Kyambura](#): according to Minority Rights Group International, which describes how they “were evicted, their animals destroyed and huts torched, and no alternative settlement was provided, all in the name of wildlife protection.”

Media contacts

Pictures, quotes and further information available upon request.

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