

By John B. Thawite

**W**hile workers all over the country are celebrating May 1 as the International Labour Day, for those in Kasese district, the day evokes sad memories.

On May 1, 2013, residents expected the usual torrential rains, but not the devastation it caused. Many were gathered at Jima Playground, where the local celebrations were taking place.

On the day, several rivers in the district burst their banks, causing flooding in several parts.

The rains came back in the first weeks of May 2014 and 2015, causing several rivers, including Nyamwamba, Mubuku, Rwini and Nyamugasani rivers, to burst their banks.

By the time the floods subsided, they had caused back-to-back destruction that saw over 15 people die in separate incidents and ravaged communities in their catchment areas.

Tens of thousands of others were displaced and, public and private property worth billions of shillings, devastated.

The dead, included the then Kasese district procurement officer, Paddy Karusu, who was swept away by water from his shop in Kanyaruboga cell, in Bulembia division.

Affected institutions included Kilembe Mines Hospital, where the river washed away the 84-unit staff quarters and destroyed critical hospital equipment and supplies. Scores of the hospital's health workers have since been displaced.

Also hit, was the already ailing Kilembe Mines Limited, whose infrastructure, especially the administration offices in Bulembia division and the hydropower supply facilities at Nyakalengija on River Mubuku in Bugoye sub-county, were destroyed.

Bridges on rivers Mubuku on the Kasese-Fort Portal highway and Nyamugasani that connects Kyahumba and Kyondo sub-counties, were damaged, paralysing access to social services, including markets, schools and health facilities.

#### Survivors

One of the survivors of the May 1, 2013 floods, Yusufu Mulwahali, an artisan at Kilembe Mines Hospital, lost his property and nearly drowned as he attempted to save what was left of his possession. Had it not been for the nearby bark tree, he, too, would have perished.

Mulwahali climbed and held onto the tree, but it was also getting submerged. This prompted the residents and Uganda Wildlife Authority rangers to quickly throw a life-saving rope to him.

When he visited the area, President Yoweri Museveni promised compensation for the bereaved families and cautioned residents against poor agro-practices on the sides and top of the Rwenzori



Residents River Mubuku, Kasese, after the floods in May 2013

# When Labour Day evokes sad memories

## Multi-billion study to contain floods

The miseries caused by the River Nyamwamba floods could soon be history if the new plan to arrest the wild river materialises.

To that end, the Government has undertaken a study, worth \$15.421million, (about sh57.7b), aimed at producing a plan - the River Nyamwamba Catchment Management Plan (CMP) - to address the river holistically. To expedite the study and produce the plan to comprehensively contain the river, the Government has hired a consultancy firm - Air Water Earth (AWE) Ltd.

"The plan is aimed at sustainably addressing all the issues behind the disasters in the Nyamwamba valley," Sowed Sewagudde, the water ministry principal environment officer in charge of international water affairs, says.

Citing environmental degradation as "one of the issues leading to this flooding," Sewagudde says, the study is aimed at offering

an unprecedented long-lasting solution to the disasters in the Nyamwamba catchment.

He also says the study is meant to unearth issues behind the sometimes fatal floods and craft ways of addressing them holistically.

"We would like to handle the Nyamwamba issue following the catchment-based water resources management strategy, which recommends management at the smallest hydrological unit," he says.

The process, Sewagudde says, is supposed to be stakeholder-driven to ensure ownership and subsequent sustainability.

Dr Ronald Musenze, the AWE chief executive officer and team leader of the Nyamwamba study, says the intervention is to tackle factors that are behind the flooding.

He says physical or engineering interventions downstream alone

may not address the causes and effects of the flooding, hence the need to use unprecedented technological and social approaches.

The study, he says, will also highlight what has been degraded and see how to rehabilitate the affected areas with alternatives that can benefit the people, while protecting the environment.

"What we are trying to do is to devise ways of supporting the communities to derive these livelihoods in a sustainable manner, without necessarily degrading the environment," Musenze explains.

Kasese district senior environment officer, Augustine Kooli, faults previous interventions for being mostly reactive and "only handling things in isolation."

"I am optimistic that the study will holistically address the frequent floods, destruction of people's livelihoods and encroachment," he notes.

Fort Portal highway to guide the water flow," Asaaba explains.

He also says Kilembe Mines Hospital and public infrastructure, such as roads, bridges and schools, damaged by the past floods, have also been repaired.

"We also share advisories with the communities through radio and community meetings and are planning a stakeholder meeting to check our level of preparedness," Asaaba says.

#### Climate change mitigation

A former Queen Elizabeth Conservation Area manager, Nelson Guma, challenges Air Water Earth (AWE) and the water ministry to go up the mountain to understand the cause of the flooding.

He says hundreds of acres of vegetation cover were destroyed in a November 2012 wildfire, that left the landscape bare, fuelling the flooding.

According to the Rwenzori Mountains National Park senior warden, James Okware, the fire was started by poachers,

Okware, however, says even when the burnt parts of the park were recovering, the recovery rate was at only between 10cm in some areas, and 30cm in others.

A Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) publication, produced by World Wildlife Fund with support from the GEEF, *Health Of The Rwenzori Resource Conservation And Management Programme*, says the park is under threat, primarily from climate change and human activities in and around it. It says climate change may cause the disappearing of the glaciers in the next 10 years, resulting in changes in rainfall patterns, floods and declining water storage capacities.

"It is estimated that by 2025, Rwenzori will no longer have glaciers," UWA warns in the publication.

It is feared that the disappearance of the glaciers, which are the most known tourist attraction, will in turn negatively affect the park's incomes.

But Sewagudde says, while the intervention might not significantly alleviate the loss of the glaciers, it could help reduce the factors behind climate change, such as temperature reduction, one of the elements fuelling glacier reduction.

"If we can increase the green of the biomass within the Nyamwamba catchment, we could contribute to the reduction of the carbondioxide in the atmosphere, which is one of the key factors behind climate change," Sewagudde says.

Several multinational and local humanitarian institutions, districts, religious institutions, individuals and agencies provided post-disaster relief supplies to mitigate the effects of the floods. To tame the river, the Government also secured over sh28b from the Egyptian government and hired Arab Contractors, an Egyptian-based firm to clear boulders and re-direct River Nyamwamba to its original course.

mountain ranges, as this encourages massive water run-off and, the subsequent soil erosion.

#### Nyamwamba tamed?

According to the mayor of Kasese Municipality, River Nyamwamba, has been reliably tamed in most hotspots, especially upstream.

He says the Government secured funds from the Egyptian government and hired Arab Contractors to install

strong gabions along the river banks, especially at the trouble spots.

"The river has been contained in Bulembia, road barrier and around Kilembe Mines Hospital, but some areas downstream in Nyakasanga, Kisagazi and Kanyangeya are still vulnerable," Kabyanga says.

He said the Government is mobilising more funds for phase two of the project, which will involve securing more

river banks and constructing a suspension bridge for the community of Masule.

Under the multi-billion agri-led plan that is being spearheaded by the national co-ordinator of Operation Wealth Creation, Gen. Salim Saleh, sh4b has been earmarked to guide human and industrial activities in the Nyamwamba valley.

But Kabyanga warns residents in the unprotected areas in the populous downstream,

Nyakasanga and Kanyangeya, to remain alert.

Wilson Asaaba, an assistant chief administrative officer, who also chairs the District Disaster Management Committee, says the district is implementing the district post-disaster recovery plan, developed in partnership with various agencies.

"Under the plan, River Nyamwamba has been de-silted from Masule bridge (upstream Nyamwamba) to Nyamwamba River, bridge on the Kasese-