



Some of the refugees attending the World Refugee Sabbath Day at Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement, recently. Photo by Lawrence Mulondo

# Govt decries environmental degradation in refugee camps

## KAMWENGE

By Lawrence Mulondo

The acting commissioner for refugees in the Office of the Prime Minister, Gerald Simon Menhya, has decried the continued degradation of the environment in refugee camps around the country.

Menhya made the remarks during the World Refugees Sabbath Day at Rwamwanja refugee settlement in Kamwenge district. The celebration was organised by the Seventh Day Adventist Church, in partnership with the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA). The day is celebrated globally on June 15.

Uganda started hosting refugees in 1948 when it received a group from Poland. Since then, the country has been hosting refugees from different countries.

Uganda has 1,223,033 refugees and asylum-seekers, in different camps and towns. These are from 30 countries, that they fled as a result of political instability, war and persecution.

"Fifty-eight percent of the vegetation cover, where refugees are resettled, is destroyed in two years," he said.

Menhya said the refugees are given food by development partners, such as the World Food Programme. Since they are not provided with means of cooking it, they cut down trees for firewood.

He said refugees are not provided with construction materials when allocated land, something which fuels the cutting down of trees for construction of houses.

The commissioner said there are double standards in the treatment of refugees by partners because those in Europe and the American Peninsula, are given gas and electricity to cook their food, unlike those in Uganda.

## WHAT THE REFUGEES SAY

**Alex Mbalushimana, 25**

The Government and development partners should provide us with bricks and other building materials that do not come from trees. This will save the available trees from being cut down to construct houses in our camp.



**Alice Ayingeneye, 19**

All of us in the camp are depending on firewood and charcoal as a source of cooking energy. The structures in the camp should be connected to electricity, which we can use for cooking, if we are to conserve the environment.

**Kadogo Bahiga, 64**

Some refugees cut down trees out of ignorance. Many do not know the effect of their action, so there is need for more sensitisation.



**Mukashema Urayineza, 37**

Cutting trees is bad. Trees help in rain formation, which we need, since we have farms in the camp. If we are to conserve the environment, authorities should create a policy that requires one to plant 10 trees for the one he/she would have cut.

"Refugees are the same, whether in a developing country or in an already developed country. If there are services given to refugees they should cut across," he emphasised.

To help conserve the environment in refugee camps, the Government, through the Office of the Prime Minister, is to plant 10 million trees around refugee camps.

Menhya asked refugees to abide by the laws of the country, to avoid

getting into problems.

"I have heard of stories where theft, rape and other crimes have been recorded in refugee camps. Refugees are not above the law," he said.

Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement commandant Fred Kiwanuka urged refugees to be cautious of Ebola, following the alert issued regarding the disease's outbreak in the country by the health ministry.

"We have kicked off with sensitisation

on how to prevent the disease or how to respond to a suspected case in the camp.

"I call on the Church to join in the struggle to prevent Ebola in the camp, through sensitisation during church services," Kiwanuka said.

## The sermon

While preaching at the celebrations, the head of the SDA Church in Uganda who was also the guest of honour, Pastor Daniel Matte, thanked the Government for opening up the borders.

He told refugees that though upheavels have taken place in their home countries, God still loves them, has saved their lives and has led them to Uganda.

Reading from the book of Lamentations, Matte said refugees have always been a part of human history.

According to the book, 500 years before Christ, people from Babylon invaded Israel and killed millions of Jews of all ages. Matte said the Jews who survived were taken from Israel to Babylon.

"You have to thank God as the Jews that were taken to Babylon were not only refugees there, but also slaves," he said.

He further prayed that the pain refugees have gone through brings them closer to God and to also accept his compassion.

The ADRA country director Charles Aguilar, thanked the Government for allowing the Church and refugees to celebrate the day in the refugee camp.

"This is the first time the Church around the world is celebrating this day in a refugee camp," he said.

Aguilar promised that the agency would continue serving humanity, just like God wants it, regardless of their social status or religious beliefs.



## MP Ogwal warns female lawmakers on divorce

● Dokolo District Woman MP Cecilia Atim Ogwal has warned young female lawmakers against infidelity, separation, divorce and putting their marital relationship on the line. Addressing the congregation at St Andrew's Church of Uganda, Angwet-Angwet in Adekokwok sub-county, Lira district on Sunday during a fundraiser, Ogwal said the institution of marriage faces challenges when the woman is elected as an MP. In 2013, Parliament tabled and debated the controversial Marriage and Divorce Bill and the Uganda Women Parliamentary Association defended it, saying many women walked away with nothing, after accumulating wealth with their husbands. The fundraising was intended to raise money to facilitate the 30 church choir members slated to travel to Nairobi for an annual music festival. Ogwal contributed sh1.5m and Jonathan Odur, the MP for Erute South, sh1.9m. Odur urged the Church to be the sanctuary of comfort and uniting factor of all political parties.

## Canadian partners offer support to ex-abductees

● The state minister for disaster preparedness, Musa Eweru, has hailed Canadian Partners from High Adventure Ministries for their support towards former Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) abductees in Amuria district. High Adventure Ministries provides support for free educational vocational skills to some of the former abducted girls and other vulnerable children in different parts of Teso. Eweru was speaking on Monday while officiating at the handover of vocational tools, tailoring machines and other start-up kits to 40 participants. This was at the Institution of High Adventure Skills Improvement Initiative in Asamuk. According to the headteacher, Faustino Eporu, since the institution commenced, 422 students have graduated, with 246 have training in tailoring and 176 learning hair dressing skills. These received similar implements. Eporu said it has been suggested that they introduce catering and mechanical engineering courses. He promised to share this with his partners. Jane Nakimuli, who had represented the partners, extended their appreciation to Eweru.