GOLD MINING THREATENS UGANDA-DRC

PHOTOS BY GERALD TENYWA

Artisanal miners at work near Kasyoha-Kitomi Forest Reserve in Kyabakara sub-county, Rubirizi, recently

MINING EFFECTS

A quiet sky hangs over Kyabakara sub-county, Rubirizi district – clouds drifting in slow passage, sunlight spilling softly across the land as though nothing beneath it is unsettled. Still, another truth persists: gold mining leaves a harsh footprint on the environment, writes **Gerald Tenywa**.

Sixty-year-old Nicholas Nuwe of Kyabakara village in Rubirizi district stoops over the earth, sifting for traces of gold buried in its hidden seams – a gruelling pursuit that is both livelihood and gamble, carried out in the fragile space between survival and risk.

This feeds his home, yet leaves the ground altered.

Not far away, the unexpected leaves Nuwe in quiet disbelief as mining "encroaches" upon Kyambura Wildlife Reserve, a sanctuary he has long avoided. Kyambura lies within the vast and renowned Queen Elizabeth National Park in Rubirizi. The park also covers parts of Kasese, Kanungu, Rukungiri and Kamwenge.

River Buhindagi, flowing into Lake George within Queen Elizabeth National Park, is becoming a widening frontier of extraction. As large concessionaires push deeper into Kyambura, illegal and small-scale miners gather along its banks, turning the soil as though it conceals a secret treasure. There, the search does not end in the earth. Portions of excavated ground are washed in the river's current, sifted by hand and water in the hope of gold.

These unfolding scenes raise pressing questions about gold mining in Kyambura and beyond. How safe is wildlife? What has been broken in the environment? What has been restored? What future awaits wildlife?

HOW SAFE IS ELEPHANT ROUTE?

An ecologist, Polycarp Mwima, says mining in places like Kyambura Wildlife Reserve is quietly tightening the noose around one of nature's oldest journeys. He says elephants now face a growing risk, as the once-active migratory corridor (passage) between Kyambura and Queen Elizabeth National Park comes under strain.

Around them, open landscapes, that once felt boundless, are now reshaped by the expanding human settlement, edging further into what was once untouched.

Carved by time and instinct, this passage once moved life in an unbroken chain of protected worlds: Kyambura Wildlife Reserve, Queen Elizabeth National Park, Kasyoha-Kitomi Forest Reserve, Kalinzu Forest Reserve, Kibale National Park, and across the border into Virunga National Park in DR Congo.

"The habitats have shrunk as wildlife face what they see as encroachment," Mwima says.

"People take over land beyond protected areas, while wild animals continue to move across a landscape they do not understand; there's no distinction between protected land and private ground."

He says there is an important corridor between Queen Elizabeth National Park and Kyambura, which elephants would use to cross and return at night.

"Once elephants use a wildlife corridor, then, other wild animals can use it," Mwima told *New Vision* in an interview.

Back to mining and its impact on Kyambura Wildlife Reserve, conservationists are increasingly troubled by the quiet pressures reshaping this fragile landscape.

An aerial view of small mining pits (middle ground) next to Kasyoha-Kitomi Forest Reserve and the polluted River Buhindagi separating the forest and private land in Kyabakara sub-county, Rubirizi district

MINING SCARS

Dr Eric Enyel, a veterinarian and Uganda Wildlife Authority's (UWA) former chief warden for Queen Elizabeth Conservation Area, says the wrong method of open-cast mining is used to extract gold.

"All vegetation is stripped away where the mining begins, leaving the earth exposed, unsettled. Mining takes place near River Buhindagi, and that alone carries risk of contamination of the river absorbing what it should never hold. Even more troubling is that the washing and cleaning of soil is done along the river itself," Enyel says.

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As River Buhindagi descends towards Lake George, it carries water from Kitagwenda district and Ibanda district. In Kitomi town, the residents report a growing concern as both large and small-scale mining reshape the river's quality along its banks.

The mining has also not spared the protected areas mainly Kasyoha-Kitomi Forest Reserve and Kalinzu Forest Reserve managed by the National Forestry Authority (NFA).

"Mining is done uphill and the cleaning out of gold happens in the river which drains in Lake George. They are getting extractives into the river. This is silting the river as all the soil goes there. The people living down the river get muddy water," says an official of NFA, who preferred not to be named.

IS THERE ANY HOPE?

In Rubirizi district, where gold mining has left its footprint, the question remains: is restoration truly taking place or possible?

Enyel says restoration efforts are ongoing within Kyambura, but the surrounding areas outside the protected park have been hit harder.

"There is no restoration in the areas outside the protected areas because the districts lack the capacity," he says.

In the district, artisanal mining – carried out with simple tools such as hoes and spades – remains largely small-scale.

"The greater damage is in the wildlife and forest reserves, which fall under UWA and NFA," Aggrey Agaba, the Rubirizi district environment officer, says.

He adds that their district officials have been reduced to bystanders.

"As the trees are cut down, we can do nothing because NEMA [National Environment Management Authority] has not shared the conditions for approval with us," Agaba says.

Emmanuel Kibirige, the national co-ordinator of Uganda Association of Artisanal and Small-Scale Miners (UAASM), says they are keen on empowering the new miners in Rubirizi.

"We are moving around the country to ensure that small scale miners get the support they need," Kibirige said.

He added that they have received reports about the encroachment in Rubirizi.

However, the pace of intervention by UAASM appears outstripped by the growing demand for its services across southwestern Uganda, where need is rising faster than response.

RUBIRIZI DISTRICT EXCLUDED

As usual, where minerals have been discovered, local authorities play hide-and-seek with their counterparts in the central government. This is not an exception at Rubirizi, Agaba