

KOBEBE DAM THIRSTY FOR INTERVENTION AS WATER RUNS DRY



Kobebe Dam in Moroto district is experiencing a significant decline in water levels, raising concerns of an impending crisis. This situation poses a serious threat to pastoral communities that rely on the dam for watering extensive herds of animals

Karamoja is one of Uganda's most water-stressed regions, marked by erratic rainfall, droughts, high temperatures and fragile catchments. Communities rely heavily on a few strategic water-for-production facilities to sustain pastoral livelihoods, making any decline in these sources an existential threat, writes **Olandason Wanyama**

Erratic and highly localised rainfall along the Uganda-Kenya border has sharply reduced water levels at Kobebe Dam in Moroto district, fuelling fears that the reservoir could dry up for the first time since its construction

16 years ago. The looming crisis threatens pastoral communities whose livelihoods depend on the dam to water large herds of cattle, sheep, goats, donkeys and camels. Situated in Lotisan sub-county, about 45km north of Moroto town, Kobebe Dam

has been hit by a toxic mix of environmental degradation and human activity within its catchment. Massive deforestation, overgrazing and recurrent bush fires have stripped vegetation cover, while road construction in the surrounding hills has

disrupted natural drainage systems that once channelled runoff into the reservoir.

Climate variability has increased the problem. Prolonged dry spells, sparse rainfall, soaring temperatures and strong winds have increased evaporation from the open water surface, accelerating the decline in water levels.

Kobebe dam is a vital water-for-production facility for pastoralists from the Ateker cluster, including the Karimojong of Uganda, the Turkana of northwestern Kenya and the Toposa of South Sudan.

The dam also supports wildlife, as it lies within the Bokora Wildlife Reserve.

A *New Vision* visit to Kobebe Dam revealed dramatically receding waters, with wide stretches of the reservoir bed now exposed.

Black cotton soils in the basin have cracked into dry, cake-like formations under intense heat, while millions of fish struggle for survival in shallow, algae-choked pools.

HERDERS RAISE ALARM

For cattle keepers, the situation is fast becoming desperate. Mariko Ilukol, 69, a Matheniko herder, warned that communities may soon be forced to migrate towards Arechek Dam in neighbouring Napak district.

"If the rains do not return soon, our lives and our cattle will be in danger," Ilukol said. He said herders have begun rationing water.

"Watering livestock is extremely exhausting. Animals drink in shifts throughout the day and in the night until morning," Ilukol said.

A Turkana herder, Lomurukai, blamed the road construction along the Nakiloro-Naput-Kotido security road for diverting runoff away from Kobebe's catchment.

"Most of the water now flows

WATER CRISIS

The Lotisan sub-county chairperson, John Robert Akiki Adupa, said the dam is steadily drying up, noting that it had reliably served pastoralists since its completion in 2011.

"This is the first time we are witnessing such a situation. Even with Executive Order No. 23 intended to curb environmental destruction, tree cutting in the catchment has continued," Adupa said.

He added that Karamoja has endured one of its worst droughts in recent history over the past three years due to persistently low rainfall.

He appealed to the Ministry of Water and Environment to urgently repair the dam and restore its catchment area ahead of the next rainy season expected in March.

along roadside channels and is discharged into Nangolol and eventually into the Lokichar catchment. Unless this is corrected, Kobebe will never retain water," he said.

Lomurukai called on contractors to restore traditional flow paths that once fed the dam from the hills along the Uganda-Kenya border.

STAKEHOLDERS' RESPONSES

Moroto district chief administrative officer Kassim Kutosi said he was not immediately aware of the dam's condition, but pledged to consult the district production office.

Moroto district water officer Musa Lowot said dams fall under the mandate of the Ministry of Water and Environment, which is responsible for water-for-production infrastructure

nationwide. He said Kobebe's catchment had been disturbed, particularly by road construction and land-use changes along the border hills.

The manager of water for production at the Ministry of Water and Environment, Wilson Tabaro, attributed the shrinking water levels to a combination of low rainfall and exceptionally high demand.

"Kobebe Dam serves the largest concentration of livestock in the region. We are closely monitoring the situation and are developing a long-term response," Tabaro said.

He said the ministry plans to convene a stakeholders' meeting to agree on corrective measures and future actions.

Eng. David Seguya, the deputy manager of water for production at the environment ministry, said Kobebe Dam was constructed by the Government of Uganda at a cost of sh6.7b.

He said last year, they counted the animals.

"We did a count when the dam was at its peak and it had a daily consumption by 6,500 head of cattle, 200 camels, 200 donkeys, 1,500 sheep, and 3,100 goats. When the dry season sets in, animals shift to other areas," he said.

It lies between the Nakapelieth hill ranges along the Uganda-Kenya border. Seguya said the dam has an embankment approximately 960 metres long, with a crest width of six metres and a height of seven metres.

The reservoir has a storage capacity of about 2.3 billion litres and is fed by two seasonal streams — Akwapua and Kongodony — which drain a catchment of roughly 10km in radius.

When full, the water level rises to about 8.5 metres, sustaining extensive grasslands and pastoral livelihoods across the region now under threat as the waters recede.