

# DEFORESTATION HARMING ELGON RANGE RESIDENTS

BY GEORGE BITA

Although trees naturally cover the hilly landscape of the Elgon mountain ranges in eastern Uganda, deforestation through human activity is spelling doom for the locals.

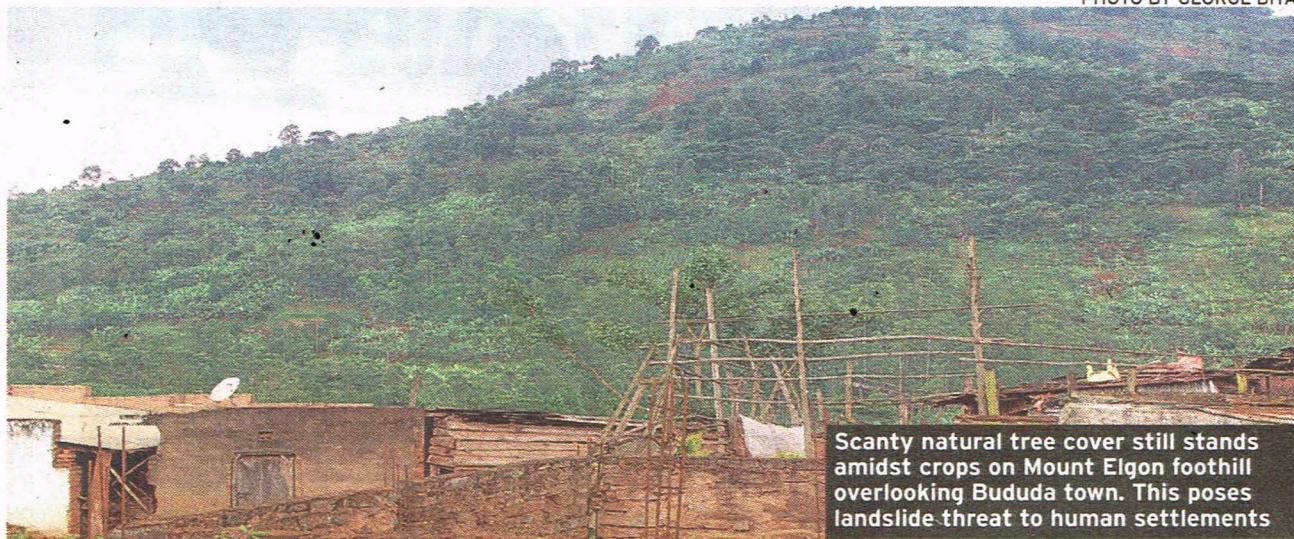
In Bududa district, located almost 30km to the southeast of Mbale town, much of the vegetation is gradually being replaced by hillside gardens of bananas and other food crops. According to Herbert Bululu, a trader in Bududa town, the expansion of the urban centre equally comes at the loss of age-old trees.

"Most roadways are created with the clearing of vegetation. Little wonder that when the rains come, they easily flood these routes, making them impassable," Bululu noted. The disappearing natural vegetation in the mountainous countryside is, at other places, replaced by houses hanging precariously on the slanting surface.

## ROLE OF TREES

Marion Namono, the Bududa district environment officer, explains that trees are crucial in absorbing carbon dioxide gas from the atmosphere and releasing oxygen.

"Carbon dioxide is a greenhouse gas leading to global warming if left to accumulate and harm the



Scanty natural tree cover still stands amidst crops on Mount Elgon foothill overlooking Bududa town. This poses landslide threat to human settlements

PHOTO BY GEORGE BITA

ozone layer. The consequence would be increased global temperatures and melting of ice on mountain peaks, as well as polar ice, causing floods," Namono said

According to her, the increased temperatures experienced of late, as well as adverse weather conditions, including floods and subsequent landslides, are effects of climate change.

## CLIMATE CALAMITIES

On March 1, 2010, a landslide buried an entire village in Nametsi sub-county, Bududa district in eastern Uganda, after a rainstorm that lasted almost seven hours. By the time a combined force of the army, Red Cross and others wound up their emergency rescue

## WHAT WENT WRONG?

Geoffrey Natubu Wafukhulu, the Bududa district chairperson, recounts that by the time the district was carved out of Mbale in 2010, it boasted of a population of 123,100 with an estimated annual growth rate of 4%. Uganda Bureau of Statistics data estimated 180,600 people to be in Bududa district in 2012 and two years later, the population reached 210,173 after the national population census held in 2014. Wafukhulu notes the total area is almost 250.8 square kilometres implying a population density of between 700-1,000 persons per square kilometre.

Research conducted by Makerere University faculty of forestry team in the area in 2011 established that between 1960 and 1995, a decrease of 1.1% implied a minimal reduction in tree cover. However from 1995 to 2006, the trend changed significantly as forest cover dropped by 34%, farmlands increased by almost 241%. In 1995 cultivated fields stood at 2024ha while by 2006, almost 6,895 ha were being used.

efforts, an estimated 100 people lay dead.

More landslides have since been reported in the area, although not as fatal as the one six years ago. For example, in August 2010, five people perished in Bushika village due to a mudslide.

Namono recounts that in 2018, another landslide killed 17 people in the mountainous zone of the local government. "In 2022, over 300 people were left without shelter after a landslide struck 48 households in Bushika sub-county. "Good enough

no human lives were lost," she added.

## PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Prime Minister Robinah Nabbanja said, after the 2010 and subsequent disasters, the Government opted to move people at risk to safer zones.

"The relocation efforts by Government are important to lessen the impact of a huge population on the hilly countryside. The fewer people we have there, the safer they are," she argues.

Sam Cheptoris, the Water and Environment Minister, said: "Government went ahead to secure new homes for 3,000 victims of the 2010 landslide in Kiryandongo. Others were encouraged to resettle in lower areas of Bulambuli district, with each getting 2.5 acres."

Cheptoris explained that this relocation was meant to reduce strain on the natural forest cover so that it rejuvenates and helps to mitigate the negative impacts of climate change.

"There has also been a concerted effort of other stakeholders, including NGOs and locals, aimed at afforestation, as well as soil conservation; the target being regeneration of natural forest cover," Cheptoris said.

Namono said settlements near river banks are being discouraged as these water bodies tend to burst banks whenever it rains heavily.

"Once the tree cover is re-established, it would be difficult to have heavy runoff of rain water leading to landslides. There is definitely hope for safety once we have more trees," she stresses.