

HOW CHILDREN END UP EXPLOITED IN

CHILD LABOUR

As children in other parts of Uganda go to school, their counterparts in Namayingo district take up shovels and pickaxes to dig the earth, with the hope of hitting gold. In the *Weekend Vision*, our undercover reporter narrated the journey to Namayingo. Today, the reporter uncovers what happens in the mines.

After four hours on the road, we arrived in Namayingo town, tired, hungry and anxious. Namayingo beat my expectations in ways I did not anticipate.

Once a rural fishing hub, it has quickly transformed into a bustling hub of trade and opportunities, with new structures rising at the same pace with its growing population.

FINDING ACCOMMODATION

I checked out one of the guesthouses. It was deeply disappointing, falling far below even the most basic expectations of comfort and hospitality.

The rooms were filthy, with poorly maintained facilities. Equally troubling was the attitude of the attendants, who came across as unwelcoming and indifferent, offering little assistance or warmth to guests.

The next guesthouse across the road was much better. The indifference towards me, however, remained.

When I questioned their bad attitude, the answer was laid bare. Most of the women who patronise the guesthouses are sex workers targeting gold miners' money and I was seen as competition.

I ignored their trivialities and focused on my assignment.

Namayingo is surprisingly expensive that a modest plate of matoke/posho and bean stew goes for sh6,000, a breakfast of milk and an accompaniment go for sh5,000-sh6,000, typically Kampala prices.

I was told the town has many criminals, so I routinely entered my room at 6:00pm and got out in the morning.

I discovered Namayingo is a melting pot of tribes, with



At the mining sites, pit owners, middlemen and supervisors have enabled the system by allowing children to work by assigning them tasks like washing, carrying and sorting soil

HOW CHILDREN GET TRAPPED

I chatted with a police officer based at a police post near Bufamba mining site and he told me that children do not end up in the mining sites randomly. He said it is the result of a tightly interwoven system of poverty, family breakdown, informal labour networks and weak enforcement.

"Families in these mining communities often lack stable income and as a result, children become the source of extra earnings. Even a small income, sometimes as little as sh2,000, can mean food on the table," he said.

He revealed that weak education systems in the district have also exacerbated the problem.

"Many children who enter the mines are already out of school or struggling in it. There are some children who try to combine both, school during the day and mining at night, but in the long run, these children eventually drop out. Once a child drops out of school, the mine becomes the default workplace," he said.

He added that the gospel that has been spread widely among school children is that mining offers immediate cash, something school does not. In their young minds, mining provides instant rewards, while education can only promise long-term benefits that feel distant and uncertain.

The law enforcer says the most common way children end up in the mines is through parents and family members.

"In most cases, there is no trafficker. It is a household decision shaped by poverty. Some parents who mine bring their children along, other children are deliberately sent on their own to earn money. Others follow their older siblings. We also notice a peer recruitment cycle, where children pull other children in," he said.

At the mining sites, pit owners, middlemen and supervisors have enabled the system by allowing children to work by assigning them tasks like washing, carrying and sorting soil.

There have been reports of cross-border and informal gold networks, normally in Kenya. These networks have expanded the need for cheap, flexible labour, which has often been filled by children.



Children washing ore on top of a ladder. Many have been forced to drop out of school

inhabitants coming from neighbouring districts such as Bugiri, Busia, Mayuge and far-flung places such as western Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda and the DR Congo. The majority of the locals speak Lusoga, Samia and Luganda languages.

PREPARING FOR ASSIGNMENT

In my immediate itinerary I was told I needed a trustworthy bodaboda rider conversant with the mining

mining sites and win the trust of hostile miners.

My first stopover was Bungecha village in Buswale sub-county.

My bodaboda rider, who was also my translator, was born and bred in Namayingo. He was calm, approachable and friendly. He knew the sites like the back of his hand. It took us about 20 minutes to get to Bungecha site.

MEETING CHILDREN

Along the way, we encountered children walking without any sense of urgency at 9:00am. They were barefoot, with tattered and untidy school uniforms. We stopped. In a brief chat with them, they revealed they had been sent home for lack of school fees.

"Could this be one of the reasons why children end up going to work in mines," I mused.

A little girl, aged about six, who clutched a dog-eared exercise book, warmed up to me in a way that felt both unexpected and genuine. Through the interpreter, she explained that she lives with her grandmother who could not raise sh10,000 as demanded by school and yet her mother is in Kenya working as housemaid.

Tears welled in my eyes. For me, in that moment, the book seemed to tell a story of persistence, of learning pursued against the odds. I saw the desire to pursue education in her. But she was returning home.

Our brief encounter attracted a crowd. Neighbours trickled in from their homesteads wondering what the problem was. They disclosed incidences of children being abducted from villages and taken for rituals in the mines due to the misconception that to get rich in gold business, human blood has to be shed.

ARRIVING AT MINE

At Bungecha, the site was 'new'; barely four days old. I found over 100 artisan miners, mostly elderly women and children, digging tunnels. In their estimation, they were still few and expected to increase to 300 members by the end of the week.

They picked rocks and sorted soil next to open pits that is believed to have gold to support their families. The soil that is extracted from the shafts is the one that women sift through to find gold.

The landlord disclosed

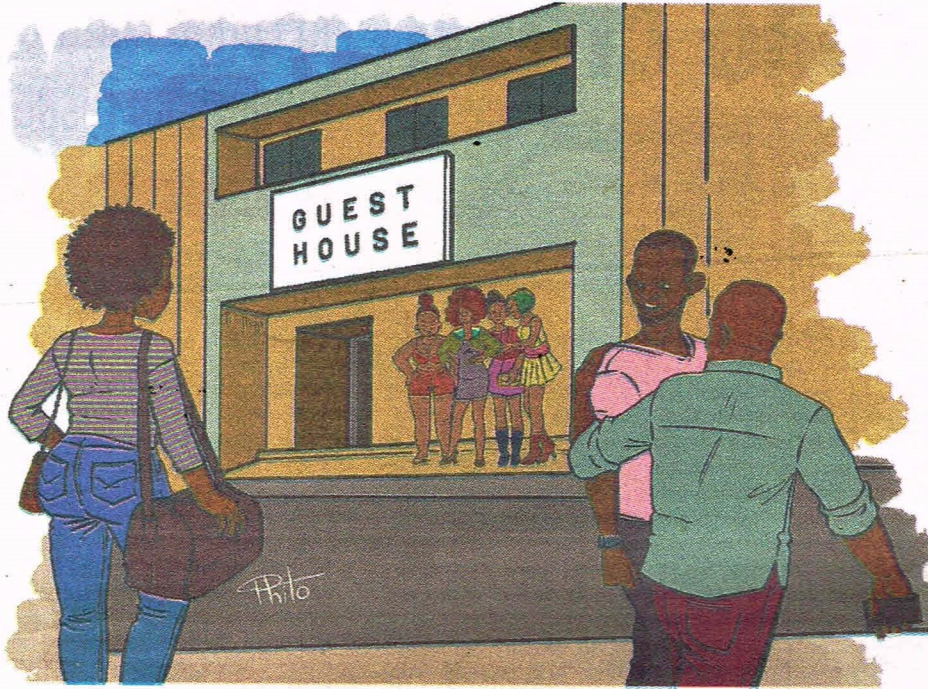
sites and a pair of gumboots since it was the rainy season.

With my cross-bag tightly strapped around my waist and baseball cap pulled to my brows, I easily fitted in without being suspected or so I thought.

It was common sight to see young women and men clad in gumboots and with waist bags taking rides in the direction of the mines.

I reflected on my assignment and how to penetrate the

NAMAYINGO GOLD PITS



The Police made an impromptu visit to the place and fired live bullets to disperse violent factions fighting for space.

find any gold. It is a game of chance. Gold chooses you. You do not choose it. I discovered that many pits

yield little or no gold.

Miners get soil underground in shafts and pack it in sacks for sale. It is commonly known as (*omuchanga*). A miner only identified as John explained that the soil sold to dealers is transported to the processing sites for grinding.

I watched as the child miners laboured in silence. Looking severely malnourished, they dug and pounded through rocks, roots and earth crust with feeble limbs. I picked a random crust and jested that I had found gold. Some children paused and mockingly laughed at me.

When asked how they know the right stones, they said they have enough experience to tell which stone has gold.

One child, barely eight years old, revealed that the 'right' stones are bright yellow and are very hard, not brittle. She said the fear of sleeping on an empty stomach is what motivates her and other underage miners to do the digging.

She usually goes with her

grandmother and her role is to pick rocks, wash them and sell to local buyers. She recalls being paid sh10,000 weeks ago, but for most times, there is no such guarantee.

"My grandmother taught me this. I don't go to school because I have no school fees. Auntie, are you here to buy gold? You don't look poor like us," she prodded. I never responded.

My assignment was brought to a sudden halt when a group of boys ganged up on me. "These are the ones," they shouted atop their voices as they circled me.

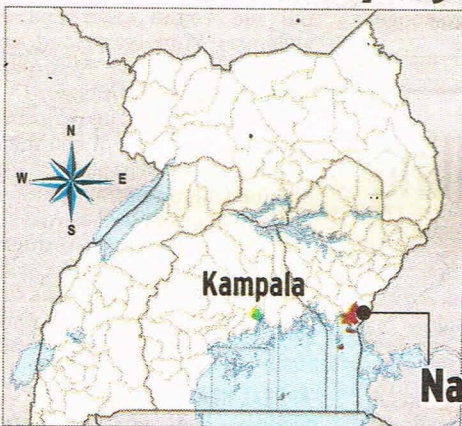
My pleas that I was there to buy gold fell on deaf ears. My rider did not need a second warning. We sped off.

I was told later that the Police had made an impromptu visit to the place and fired live bullets to disperse violent factions fighting for space.

In the third part tomorrow, we explain the health problems that are brewing in the mines

GRAPHIC BY PHILLIP NSAMBA

Location of Namayingo district



Namayingo

Population:

266,716



Distance from Kampala:

177km

Namayingo

SANITATION CHALLENGE

One thing is unmistakable at Bungecha. There is a heavy stench of human waste. Flies swarm relentlessly, settling on anything that dares remain still. With no latrine in sight, women men and children defecate in the open as they go about their hunt for gold, oblivious of the looming health dangers.

Open defecation is a severe wide spread sanitation crisis in the Namayingo gold mines. This has been driven by a rapid, unregulated population influx and a lack of pit latrines.

The crisis has caused severe water contamination of Lake Victoria, leading to cholera outbreaks in the community. The Government once issued directives to shut down mining activities in areas such as Nakudi, but this remains on paper.

that the gold in the area was discovered by someone who was digging a pit latrine.

Following the discovery, gold hunters flocked to the area. They destroyed a coffee and banana plantation in the process, but the landlord

was not bothered. In his estimation, gold earns him in a minute what he used to get from bananas and coffee in years. Each miner looking for gold on his land pays him a fee.

Whether or not the gold

hunters hit a jackpot is the least of the landlord's worries. He hires out a piece of land measuring 50x50 metres at sh500,000. Each miner must not go beyond the space hired out to them. If the miner exceeds the agreed metres, they have to pay.

While there, the miners kept asking me whether I was there to buy gold and I answered in the affirmative yet I did not have gas and digital scale, which are used for testing and measuring gold. This made them doubt what I was telling them.

Some of them were testing soil from tunnels to see whether each tunnel has gold. Others advised me to buy a sack of sand, which cost sh400,000 each. I scooped a handful of sand and tested it alongside my rider, but it had no gold particles.

You can buy 100 bags locally called *ekifulusi* and fail to