

End the crisis of child labour in mines

NEW VISION'S undercover investigation in Namayingo gold mines has revealed a harrowing picture of child labour that is becoming a national crisis. Boys and girls as young as seven are toiling in muddy pits instead of sitting in classrooms, handling toxic substances, risking death from collapsing shafts and enduring exploitation that no child should ever face. Yet this is not an isolated problem confined to Namayingo.

Uganda is a signatory to international conventions championed by the International Labour Organisation, which classify mining among the worst forms of child labour. Yet thousands of our children remain trapped in this dangerous trade. Estimates indicate that more than 15,000 children are engaged in artisanal and small-scale gold mining, driven by poverty, weak enforcement and the false promise of quick wealth. These children are facing numerous problems, including lack of education, poverty, early marriages and teenage pregnancies. Some girls are forced into transactional sex with older men working in the mines.

Local leaders in districts like Namayingo must stop treating



EDITORIAL

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this as an inevitable reality. The presence of children in mines is not hidden. Local council leaders and district authorities must take firm responsibility by enforcing laws, monitoring school attendance and actively reporting and preventing child exploitation. Leadership at the grassroots

must become the first line of defence for vulnerable children. The Police should also work closely with probation officers to dismantle the networks that enable exploitation, including those facilitating the movement of children across districts into mining hubs.

At the national level, the Government, particularly the ministries of energy and gender, need to implement a co-ordinated and sustained strategy to end this crisis. This includes strict enforcement of child labour laws, proper regulation of artisanal mining and increased investment in social protection programmes. Equally important is fixing the gaps within the education system.

Universal Primary Education schools, especially those in hard-hit districts like Namayingo, need to heed to President Museveni's call and end the practice of sending children home over minor fees or lack of scholastic materials. Every child turned away from school is one more pushed toward the mines. Expanding school feeding programmes and strengthening community sensitisation can also help keep children in classrooms.