

# TROUBLED WATERS

## THE KENYA-UGANDA DIPLOMATIC TENSION OVER THE MIGINGO ISLAND AND AFRICA'S RESOURCE-BASED CONFLICTS

Ernest Waititu & Violet Barasa

*Daily Monitor* (Kampala, Uganda)  
20 March 2009

---



*Migingo Island as it stands in the middle of Lake Victoria. Both Kenya and Uganda have failed to agree on who owns it. The row over the island reflects the simmering tensions over resources, wrought by declining rainfall, changing weather patterns and acute food insufficiency in Africa. PHOTO BY ELISHA OTIENO.*

***The looming Kenya-Uganda diplomatic row over Migingo Island may be like the proverbial bald men fighting over a comb, but if sanity doesn't prevail, Kenya and Uganda could clash over the small Lake Victoria island setting the stage for more resource-related conflicts in Africa.***

FUELLED BY A MIXTURE OF GLOBAL WARMING, ENVIRONMENTAL RUIN, MOUNTING droughts and famine, conflicts over resources are pushing Africa to the precipice.

A fast-gathering storm is brewing between Kenya and Uganda over the tiny but fish-rich Migingo Island in Lake Victoria, prompting Kampala to move at least 100 marines to the disputed island.

Uganda had by Tuesday February 24, 2009 replaced the soldiers with its police, which are purportedly collecting Shs1.4m (\$750), a year, in tax from Kenyan fishermen to allow them access to the fish resources. Kenya's Members of Parliament from the region have called on the Kenyan government to deploy the country's navy in the area and further set up a naval base in the lake to "deal with external aggression."

Uganda's State Minister for Internal Affairs, Mr Matia Kasaija, told The Daily Monitor newspaper that Kenyans "cannot claim this Island because it belongs to Uganda."

Kenya's Prime Minister, Raila Odinga, has put it categorically that the island belongs to Kenya "since time immemorial" and that the ownership of the island "is not negotiable."

Further, Mr Odinga told the country's Parliament last week that Kenya should also seek to reclaim five other islands in the lake annexed from Kenya by the former Ugandan President Idi Amin.

Oxfam America recently warned that "spiralling food prices are tipping millions in East Africa towards catastrophe." What Kenya is experiencing is a contest over resources, argues Kenya's Fisheries Minister Paul Otuoma.

Declining fish stock in much of Lake Victoria coincides with the worrying drop in water levels in the lake but strikingly, Migingo Island has maintained steady stocks of the rare Nile Perch.

### **Balding and fighting over a comb**

The looming Kenya-Uganda showdown over the Migingo Island may be like the proverbial bald men fighting over a comb, but it certainly reflects the simmering tensions over resources, wrought by declining rainfall, changing weather patterns and acute food insufficiency in Africa.

Rolling back climate change and food insecurity is central to reducing the risk of anarchy and chaos on the continent, which if not checked threatens the consolidation of the East African Community and Africa Union in general.

Drought, famine, ethnic violence, embezzlement and mismanagement at Kenya's National Cereals and Produce Board have left 10 million Kenyans in the throes of starvation even as experts envisage an unusually long dry spell in the country.

President Mwai Kibaki was the first in the region to declare hunger a national disaster on January 16. He pleaded for Shs37b (\$470 million) to feed close to a third of the country's population now facing starvation.

By the same token, the Uganda Government declared drought as "the single most important and widespread disaster in Uganda." In Uganda's perennially drought-stricken Karamoja region, Kampala has declared an emergency and moved to feed the population.

The 2009 drought comes hot on the heels of the wild weather swings and three concurrent droughts in Uganda's poorest region. The latest drought, in 2008, reduced agricultural output to as low as 30 per cent, leaving much of the population on the edge of starvation.

Despite successfully emerging from its 1999-2005 slow genocide, Burundi's peace is threatened by chronic food insecurity. The World Food Programme has reported that an estimated 16,500 households are facing a severe food shortage. The situation is equally dire in volatile Somalia and Ethiopia's Afar region. Africa's water resources are drying out, increasing the risk of war.

As many as 250 million people, more than a quarter of the continent's people, may not have enough



water to meet their basic needs by 2020, predicts Charles Ehrhart, an expert with the humanitarian organisation, CARE International. The African Union's elaborate early warning system in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, may as well become another white elephant if Africa fails to forestall the crisis.

Ominous signs are unambiguously on the wall. In Chad, a subtle blend of deforestation, climate change and bad policies has seen the once mighty Lake Chad dry out as the major rivers that fed it dwindled. Bone-dry is also Lake Haramaya, once a burgeoning source of livelihood for thousands of people in eastern Ethiopia.

East Africa's Lake Victoria, the source of the Nile and the lifeline of millions of people in the 12-nation strong riparian region and the Nile basin may be destined for a similar fate if the current wanton destruction of forests and water towers that feed it continues unchecked. The Nile, which supports between 160 and 180 million people in its 6,695 kilometre basin spread through nine countries, is also endangered.

Uganda's quest for hydroelectric power, which led it to build three dams along the Nile and has not helped the situation. The dams continue to draw enormous amounts of water from the lake. In 1999, Uganda added Kiira Dam to the 1954 Nalubaale Dam as the demand for power grew.

This doesn't seem to have helped much either, as the country has embarked on a third larger project in the construction of Bujagali Dam. While the dam is further downstream from Kiira, its capacity, at 250 megawatts, is set to be bigger, and therefore expected to draw extra water from the lake on its completion.

Uganda's decision to build the dams to meet its spiralling power demand has over-stretched the demand for Nile waters and created tensions across the region.

"The Lake is under threat. It is drying up. It cannot support the livelihoods of the people living around it," Frank Muramuzi, the director of the Kampala-based National Association of Professional Environmentalists, cautioned recently in an interview with The Daily Nation.

### **There will be no lake in 20 years**

"If we continue losing more than two metres every four years, given the construction of dams (by the Uganda Government), climate change due to global warming and other factors, we will have no lake 20 to 30 years from today," he added.

The dying of Lake Victoria would jeopardise at least 30 million people along its shores and many more in the 12 riparian states supported by the Nile — Burundi, Central Africa Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda. Egypt has over the years warned of its readiness to go to war over the Nile waters.

In an article published in John Hopkins University's Journal, The SAIS Review, Ashok Swain, censured Egypt for dominating the water politics in the Nile River Basin, developing its water-related infrastructure unilaterally while not ploughing back the yields into environmental conservation efforts in the riparian states around Lake Victoria.

The benefits from the massive flow of volumes of water downstream are widely seen as the reason why Cairo has remained curiously mute on Uganda's ambitious drive to dam the upper Nile, despite fierce protest by riparian states like Tanzania against the draining of the lake. Even more worrying is the encroachment and wanton destruction of Kenya's Mau forest and strategic water tower.

Nearly 25 per cent of the 400,000-hectare of the Mau ecosystem has already been destroyed and the remaining three-quarter segment is facing extinction.

The degradation of the Mau Water Tower threatens the rain water basin for at least 12 major rivers which feed Lake Victoria and are a critical lifeline of millions of people in at least the six countries of Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Sudan and Tanzania.

The imperatives of Kenya's post-election power-sharing politics now stand on the path of the restoration of the Mau Water Towers. This, and other resource-related conflicts with a bearing on the riparian region, is



a sure recipe for the regional conflagrations of the future.

---

---

**Ernest Waititu** is Africa Policy Institute Director of Media & Communication, based in Nairobi Kenya.

**Violent Barasa** is a Nairobi-based Researcher with the Africa Policy Institute.

The article was originally published by **Africa Insight, an initiative of the Nation Media Group's Africa Media Network Project**, under the heading: "A Kenya-Uganda clash over L. Victoria fish could be a 'model' Conflict for the African Continent".

