

SAVING MABIRA FOREST RESERVE IS ABOUT SAVING OUR NATIONAL HERIGATE AND RESPECTING OUR CONSTITUTION

Press Statement by Civil Society Organizations Opposed to the Proposed Degazettment of Part of Mabira Forest Reserve

August 22, 2011:

1. Our President is back in the news. At a time when our country and our people are experiencing unprecedented economic uncertainty and widespread disruptions in economic activity on account of unpredictable weather patterns, the President is not offering solutions to the economic crisis that our country and our people are going through. He is not offering solutions to address the plight of our teachers who are asked to nurture our next generation of engineers, doctors, lawyers, nurses or leaders. He is not offering proposals on how to cut down big government and the political patronage network that is sucking every ounce of blood from Ugandan tax payers. He is not offering reforms that will resuscitate an economy that is in the intensive care unit with galloping inflation reaching 81.7% and skyrocketing fuel and commodity prices. Our President is in the news because he wants to give way 7,100 ha of part of Mabira Forest Reserve to the Metha Group of Companies - the owners of Sugar Corporation Uganda Limited (SCOUL).
2. To his credit, President Museveni has not only signed the biggest number of environmental laws since he came to power more than two and half decades ago. He has also appointed and used our tax money or incurred a burgeoning foreign debt on our behalf and on the behalf of our children to pay public servants that work with these institutions. Although he may not know, we have no doubt that our President needs a lot of help because he is increasingly out of touch with the suffering that Ugandans are experiencing in the face of calamitous environmental phenomenon and economic hardships. One does not need rocket science to know that the lowering of the waters of Lake Victoria which led to escalation in load shedding and put the water supply system of our Nation's capital at peril was a result of our inability to manage our environment in a sustainable and responsible manner.

3. Today, we call upon Ugandans to recognize that even after half a century of independence, our successive governments have failed to transform our economy from a nature-based economy to new forms of economic activities in the services and technology sectors. While President Museveni and the NRM may be applauded for the impressive economic growth trends during the first 10 years of its tenure, the apparent stagnation of the economy and the failure of Government to enact important policies such as the national land policy is symptomatic of all governments that suffer from inertia that is the product of regime survival and regime longevity politics.

4. All Ugandan's, perhaps with the exception of the President and the Metha Group know the economic, ecological, social and other values of Mabira Forest Reserve. Each one of us who has attended Primary school get to know Mabira Forest Reserve as one of our Nation's heritage at the heart of Buganda Kingdom and Uganda. This unique national heritage is a host to unique bird, plant, primate, and butterfly and tree species. Two animal species found here are not found anywhere else in the world. It also hosts 40% of the total bird species found in Uganda, of which five are globally threatened with extinction. Our President believes that this treasure should be destroyed and our children and grandchildren should not enjoy this treasure so that Metha can produce sugar cane!

5. Mabira Forest Reserve is the only block of tropical forest cover remaining in the central region located close to our Nation's major urban centres. It is not only an extremely important refugium for biodiversity, it is also a major eco-tourism destination accounting for over 60% of the tourists that visited Uganda's forest reserves every year. Its current economic and ecological values stem from the range of goods and services it provides in the form of timber, domestic water, carbon storage, and its water catchment services. River Musambya and River Sezibwe flow into Lake Kyoga from here.

6. To many of us, the struggle to save Mabira Forest Reserve is much more than an economic, ecological or emotional struggle. It is about our present and future as a nation. It is about respect for our national heritage, our constitution and respect for our environmental laws. This is why we call upon all Ugandan's of good will to categorically reject the current maneuvers by the President to degazette and donate to Metha part of Mabira Forest Reserve.

7. We call upon Ugandans to understand that the current maneuvers over Mabira are not an isolated incident. They epitomize the growing intransigence by Government and the corporate arrogance of groups such as Metha that want to trash the laws that govern our country for short term economic gains while putting the long-term sustainability of our economy and the livelihoods of our people at stake. Our forest reserves do not belong to the President and are not freely available for political and economic football. The idea that our President acts as a corporate public relations officer of Metha or any other so called investor is simply unacceptable. The framers of the 1995 constitution knew how an intransigent government can destroy our Nation's natural resources. That is why they secured our natural resources under article 237(2)(b) of the constitution.
8. We also take this opportunity to warn fellow Ugandans to be worry that the reigniting of the issue of Mabira may be a decoy to divert Ugandan's from equally pressing national economic and governance issues. Government has failed to come up with an economic plan to create jobs for the youth, arrest inflation or increase agricultural productivity. In the face of a severely weakened Parliament, the President has taken advantage and built a political patronage network of presidential advisors, 76 cabinet ministers, Resident District Commissioners, etc. Gerrymandering through creation of districts has grown the size of Parliament to 375 MPs. Instead of providing proposals on how he intends to cut down the size of Government so that we save money to grow the economy, create jobs, pay our teachers, doctors, nurses and the men and women who make the ultimate sacrifice by putting on our police and military uniform to defend our country, he is diverting us back to Mabira which should be a peripheral issue in the light of the current economic conditions.
9. We believe that the President has resurrected the issue of Mabira Forest Reserve to divert Ugandans from paying attention to one of the most draconian legislation in the offing – the so called economic crimes legislation. The idea that citizens exercising their right to freedom of speech and assembly and to protest against government failure constitute economic sabotage is simply diversionary and irrelevant. Government needs to be reminded that economic sabotage when government fails to invest in the agriculture sector which drives our national economy or fails to invest in securing our environment that is the lifeline the economy and rural livelihoods. Ugandans are being diverted to the defense of Mabira Forest Reserve as one of the pillars of dictatorship and despotism in the name of anti-bail legislation is being constructed.

10. We remind fellow country men and women irrespective of age, nationality, political affiliation or gender that protecting our environment in general and Mabira Forest Reserve is a sacred duty that is bestowed upon us by the constitution. It is our patriotic duty and civic obligation to rise up within the confines of our sacred constitution bequeathed to us by the men and women of the Constituent Assembly to vehemently oppose the maneuvers to degazette part of Mabira Forest Reserve. We do not only consider our actions a fundamental constitutional responsibility but also a legitimate civic duty to challenge those who are determined to decimate our natural resources heritage under the pretext of sugar production.

11. In the light of the challenges we face, we in civil society commit ourselves and call upon all Ugandans to rise up in defense of Mabira and to demand for better government and accountable leadership. We applaud all the efforts that are being made by all Ugandans: traders, religious leaders, traditional leaders, professionals, the youth and all organized groups of citizens – to demotivate our President from proceeding down the road of self-conscious ecological destruction that he has set this country on.
 - 11.1. We invite every Ugandan to write to their Member of Parliament to demand that as guarantors of all public trust resources, they must prevail on the President and help him from the course of ecological destruction that he is pursuing.

 - 11.2. Civil society will use every civic means available within the limits of legal restrictions that are justifiable in the context of our constitution to mount the most rigorous opposition to the proposed give away of Mabira Forest Reserve and the illegal takeover of this forest by the self-seeking Metha Group.

 - 11.3. We call upon Metha Group to unequivocally state their position of the President’s project of giving away Mabira for their sugar cane enterprise. Unless they renounce any claim to Mabira Forest Reserve, we will re-launch our campaign to mobilize Ugandans and residents of good will to start an immediate boycott of Lugazi Sugar. If need arises, and unless other sugar companies put peer pressure on Metha to abandon their illegal scheme, we will extend such campaign to mobilize all citizens to abandon

buying sugar. Ugandans can live without drinking sugar. The landslides in Budada, the regular flooding in our Nation's capital, the worsening disease burden and the disruptions in agricultural activity caused by unpredictable weather patterns show us that our chances of survival are severely diminished in the face of environmental degradation.

11.4. We will immediately explore the possibility of taking legal action both in Uganda courts and the East African Court of Justice to apply for appropriate remedies.

11.5. We call upon their excellences the Presidents of Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda and Tanzania to raise the matter of Mabira Forest Reserve with President Museveni in the spirit of the East African Community Treaty and the various protocols and communiqués they have signed committing our respective countries to responsible stewardship of our environment.

To the Members of the NRM Party and the NRM Parliamentary Caucus, we hope that sanity will prevail and you will always remember that Uganda is much bigger than NRM and any President and you can use your influence to dissuade the President from reversing the good environmental record of the Party.

To the opposition parties and all members of parliament, the issue of Mabira is a political issue but a non-partisan one. We call upon you to adopt a resolution authorizing a full inquiry to establish the interests of the President and Metha in Mabira Forest Reserve.

To all Ugandans, a deteriorating environment impacts on each one of us and the future of our children is at stake. Mabira Forest Reserve unites us as Ugandans and anybody who doesn't understand that is simply out of touch with our worsening economic situation. Let us rise up and defend Mabira. By defending Mabira, we honor our constitution and respect our flag.

For God and My Country