

## NEWS IN-DEPTH

# Displaced Serenje families in anguish

By CHAMBO NG'UNI  
**ELLEN Chola of Serenje's Luombo farm block is short of words to describe her anguish.**

Her village and 10 others located in Senior Chief Muchinda's area were recently demolished by a commercial farmer who claims the land on which the structures were built is his.

Seventy-eight families, representing 200 people have been left homeless.

The disputed land is now in the hands of Billy Vickers of Bill's Farm who recently bought farm number 26 in Luombo farm block.

Mrs Chola, who is in her 70s, never imagined that her village established in the early 1960s would one day be demolished and they would, in turn, become internally displaced.

She is among the first people who settled on the disputed land. For her, this is home and this is where she will be buried when she dies.

Her five children, grandchildren and great grandchildren where all born in the disputed area.

"I was young when we settled there," she lamented. "All my children were born there [and] we have now been chased."

She says the disputed land is customary land and as far as

she is concerned the land has never been part of Mr Vickers' farm number 26.

Her husband's grave and those of other people who died in the demolished villages are on the land Mr Vickers has allegedly grabbed.

"What can we do?" she groans, "this is our land and now this man has taken our land and demolished our villages. We are now suffering."

Central Province permanent secretary Edwidge Mutale visited the affected families recently also heard that farm number 26 has changed hands about three times with Mr Vickers being the new owner.

Information gathered from the affected families and office of Serenje district commissioner Charles Mwelwa indicate that 78 families have been left homeless and they sought refuge in a nearby Musangashi forest reserve.

Mr Vickers allegedly used a bulldozer to demolish their houses and destroy their fields.

Moson Chip who spoke on behalf of the displaced people claims that when Mr Vickers bought the farm in April and he told them to leave because they were squatting on his land.

"We did not even work in our fields. We are now starving and suffering because we don't have food or water and we are sleeping in the open," he told Mrs Mutale.

Despite having objected

Mr Vickers said the land was his. He allegedly demolished their villages, tampered with their fields and graves of their relatives, Mr Chip said.

Mr Chip said Mr Vickers told them in April to vacate the disputed land, failure to which he was going to force them out.

"He come from Zimbabwe [and] in April he told us to move out...even graves of our parents have been tampered with," he said.

He urged the government to help the displaced people claim back their land, wondering why they should be suffering in their own country.

"We urge Government to come to our aid we are Zambians," he said. "It's our country and how can foreigners come and displace us from our land?"

Mr Chip said even previous owners of farm number 26 also threatened to evict them but they resisted because, to their knowledge, they settled on customary land belonging to Senior Chief Muchinda.

Eshime Kunda, another affected person says all her seven children, 13 grandchildren and five great grandchildren were born on the land that Mr Vickers has allegedly grabbed.

"We have children and we don't have food. Even where to get water it's a problem for us," she lamented.

Unless the government

intervenes, Mr Kunda fears they risk becoming squatters.

"We have come here to know your problems and the hardships," Mrs Mutale said. "We have seen that even small children are not going to school."

Mrs Mutale, who was accompanied by Mr Mwelwa, was not happy in the manner the displaced families were evicted by the commercial farmer.

"At the moment, I am saddened. I am almost shedding tears because I am told that children are also sleeping outside in the open," Mrs Mutale told the aggrieved people.

Mrs Mutale said the government was concerned about their plight and would help them.

She also assured them that she would pursue the matter with Minister of Lands, Natural Resources and Environmental Protection to ascertain the true ownership of the disputed land.

She said Musangashi forest reserve where they were squatting is not reserved for human settlement.

Serenje district agriculture officer George Chisebuka said records available at his office indicate that Mr Vickers' farm was originally a 360-hectare farm.

But it is now a 2,000 hectares, including the land

he has allegedly grabbed from the displaced people.

"Today the situation is very bad. The people are now living in Musangashi forest," Mr Chisebuka who displaced the map of the disputed land and surrounding farms told Mrs Mutale.

He explained that when the government was established Luombo farm block in 1997, people who were found in the now disputed land were left because it was considered to be customary land.

Mr Vickers' farm has changed ownership for about three times and as for him, he is claiming to have a title from the Ministry of Lands.

Mr Chisebuka said the disputed land is located between farms number 27 and 25 but Mr Vickers is now claiming to have title deeds for the land.

And Mrs Mutale informed the displaced people that in the meantime, the Disaster Management and Mitigation Unit (DMMU) will provide them with tents and relief food to help lessen their hardships.

She also said two big tents will also be mounted - one will be used by healthcare providers and another one will serve as a community school.

The permanent secretary added that Serenje District Council will dig wells for them so that they can access water.



ELLEN Chola in her 70s is among 200 people who have been forcibly evicted from their villages by a commercial farmer in Luombo farm block in Serenje and are now squatting in Musangashi forest reserve.