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 Munsaka’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 300 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 borne and this is where she will be buried when she dies.

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

“I was young when we settled here,” 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.

“Who 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 Mutele visited the affected families recently and 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 Mwamba 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 homes 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 move out... even graves of their parents have been tampered with,” he 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,” Mrs Mutale said.

She also said two big tents found in the forest were used to accommodate the displaced families who were evicted by the commercial farmer.

“At the moment, I am saddened, I am almost thinking twice because I am told that children are also sleeping outside in the open,” Mrs Mutale told the aggrieved families.

All my children were born on this land?” she lamented.

Unless the government intervenes, Mr Vickers 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 Mutele, was not happy in the manner the displaced families were evicted by the commercial farmer.

“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 them, Vickers’ farm has changed ownership for about three times and as for him, he is willing to have a title from the Ministry of Lands.

Mr Chip said the disputed land is located between farms number 27 and 35 but Vickers is now claiming to have title deeds for the land.

All 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 be mounted - one with tent, and relief food will also be mounted - one to help them.

Serenje district agriculture officer George Chisebuka said records available at his office indicate that Mr Vickers’ farm was originally a 350-hectare farm.

But it is now a 2,000 hectares, including the land 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 maps 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 left homeless.

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