Are Mubende gold miners moving east?

By Titus Kakembo

Artisanal gold miners, who were evicted from mines in Mubende district, are relocating to eastern Uganda and Karamoja region, according to the Water Governance Institute (WGI).

WGI executive director Henry Bazira said the miners are also introducing health-endangering methods of gold extraction such as the use of mercury, which has been minimally used there.

He said the miners are desperate to survive and have, therefore, moved from the Mubende mines with practices they engaged in.

Bazira was speaking during a stakeholders’ meeting at Hotel Africana in Kampala recently to disseminate research findings on the mining industry’s compliance to social and environmental safeguards in Uganda.

WGI has been implementing a two-year (2015-2017) project on promoting mining industry compliance to social and environmental safeguards in Uganda.

Bazira noted that in Karamoja, there is minimal use of mercury, because it is kept in check by traditional beliefs. He explained that the Karimojong believe the use of mercury would anger their gods. Bazira expressed concern that this could easily be eroded as new entrants widely use it.

He called on the Government to ensure that safeguards are strictly adhered to, just like it is done in the developed world, so that people can benefit without endangering their health and the environment.

Effects

Bazira said due to the careless use of mercury in Mubende, diseases such as Parkinson’s, are manifesting in youth.

He noted that a number of other related ailments are being witnessed.

“When mercury vapour goes in the body, it damages some body parts, but the effect is felt long after,” Bazira explained.

The effects include memory loss, collapsing and loss of disabilities. He also cited body parts such as feet and hands with leopards-like spots and...
A boy in search of gold nuggets at an open-pit gold mine in Lukingi village, Mubende

bleached skin. He said birds and plants also die.

There is also contamination of the soil and water ways, which then transfers mercury into the food chain endangering human beings who consume these foods,” he added.

“And this has been non-existent in Nakapiripiri because they were not using chemicals in their small-scale mines, but pans and water,” Bazira said.

Desire for fortune

He noted that in Mubende, people have been driven to use mercury by the desire to make a fast fortune. It is the same thing they are continuing with in their new locations.

According to Bazira, the number of endangered artisanal miners has doubled in the last five years to about 400,000 out of the 1.5 million who are involved in the trade.

The Minister of State for Energy and Minerals, Peter Lokeris, said there are regulations that need to be adhered to if the environment and human beings are to be protected.

“The ministry is reviewing policies on mining and their mineral sector,” Lokeris said.

Ance Nakafero, a National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) official, lamented that huge volumes of mercury are still being imported into the country through porous borders.

1.5m
The number of endangered artisanal miners

2 years
WGI’s has a two-year project promoting mining industry compliance to social safeguards

NEMA
Huge volumes of mercury are being imported into the country illegally