Ugandan President Museveni proposes land giveaways to international business interests

Our correspondent
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Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni sparked widespread social anger this week by proposing that 7,297 hectares of the Mabira Central Forest Reserve be allocated to SCOUL, (Sugar Corporation of Uganda Limited) a subsidiary of the Mehta Group of Companies, which is a private conglomerate based in Mumbai, India. Mehta operates on four continents.

The Mabira Central Forest Reserve is one of Uganda's largest ecological reserves. It is home to hundreds of species of trees, birds, and primates.

Under Museveni's proposal, SCOUL would acquire about 24 percent of the total area of the Mabira Reserve for the purpose of growing sugar. If this expropriation occurs, Museveni and SCOUL claim that the manufacturer could increase sugar production and save about US$25 million to US$50 million each year in sugar imports. Uganda has recently seen massive spikes in sugar prices. Also, the value of the Ugandan shilling has declined sharply against the US dollar in the last few months, which has caused a sharp increase in the cost of living.

On Tuesday August 23, Museveni addressed his NRM ruling party caucus declaring: "Uganda is suffering from low sugar supply due to lack of land for sugarcane growing." In other words, Museveni is hijacking public land on behalf of international corporations, ostensibly to alleviate the high price of sugar. Nothing could be further from the truth. Most production of any resource inside Uganda is designated for export abroad. This is just the latest giveaway of Uganda's assets to international financial interests in a sordid series of privatizations Museveni has carried out since coming to power in 1986.

This wholesale theft of resources on behalf of international capital has had a catastrophic effect on the Ugandan working class and deepened social inequality.

In Mayuge, a district that is near the Mabira Forest Reserve, families suffering financial hardship have been selling their land very cheaply to sugar companies and are left with very small pieces of land for food crops cultivation, a situation that has caused food insecurity in the district. These "dirt cheap" land acquisitions are not unique to Uganda, but are shockingly common in all parts of Africa.

In June and July of this year, 1760 residents of the Nakawa-Naguru housing estate were brutally evicted from their land by a force of police and bulldozers to make way for the development of the land into a "satellite" town under a $300m government contract awarded to Opec Prime Properties, a UK-based construction firm.

Some residents rebelled and refused to leave, saying they had nowhere to go. As the police and bulldozers moved in and smashed through their homes, they hurriedly threw what property they had outside to avoid destruction.

The project has gone ahead despite a 2009 report by Uganda's Inspector General (IGG) that exposed massive government corruption in the allocation of the land to Opec, part of the UK's Comer Group International construction firm. At the time, the IGG report demanded that the Museveni administration cancel the contract.

The Nakawa-Naguru development project engineer said that "there would be no compensation or relocation effort allocated on behalf of the residents", claiming that "the residents had not paid rent in seven years, and *that* was their compensation". The new development project is allegedly for "low-income earners" when completed. The construction is to be undertaken over the next ten years. In the interim, hundreds of residents have been left homeless.

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The estate was comprised of small ramshackle houses originally built by the British colonial administration in the 1950's. Condemned as "unfit for humanity" on several occasions by governmental authorities over the years, the Nakawa-Naguru estate is testament to the dire social conditions suffered by the evicted residents.

In another recent incident of privatization, Museveni is attempting to expropriate land in the Amuru District in Northern Uganda for the Madhvani Group, another international conglomerate, for sugarcane production.

Northern Uganda has been wracked by war and civil strife in recent years. Many people have been displaced, and the Museveni government has avoided the issue of the crisis of displaced victims of the various conflicts.

The Amuru land expropriation gives away land that rightfully belongs to the displaced people, depriving them of their ancestral land. According to the Ugandan *Daily Monitor*, Madhvani's proposals for the land bear similarities to a military report issued in 2005 by General Salim Saleh titled "Security Production Programme for Northern Uganda", which calls for turning the IDP (Internally Displaced Person) camps into towns as a way of forestalling settlement of the people on their rightful land. It is this land that the Madhvani Group and other foreign interests have set their sights on.

Museveni's 25-year rule is riddled with countless examples of the government's complete subservience to international capital and indifference to the economic misery of Uganda's working class.

Museveni's principal political rival for the presidency, Dr. Kizza Besigye of the Forum for Democratic Change party is no better. If elected, he has stated his support for policies of "attracting foreign investment" that differ little from the current government's economic policies.

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