

Heavy downpour, floods batter Kampala

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Pupils of St James Primary School in Bwaise leaving school as the floods invaded their classrooms yesterday

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KAMPALA'S low-lying areas yesterday turned into a big lake following a downpour that lasted for over eight hours. This is the second time floods batter the capital in one week.

Slums and wetlands in Kampala and its suburbs were most affected, with water gushing into people's houses and denying some people access to the main roads.

This forced residents in the most affected areas of Bwaise, Kalerwe, Kireka, Katwe and Ndeeba to wade through the water to drier ground. In Kireka and Bwaise, residents resorted to scooping water out of their houses with buckets and basins.

On Entebbe Road, areas like Lufuka, Najjanankumbi, Namasuba and Zana were submerged. Within the city centre, Clock Tower and Kisenyi were most affected.

In Kawempe division, besides Bwaise and Kalerwe, some houses on the recently opened Northern Bypass were also flooded. The water, which rose up to knee level at some places, washed away people's property and forced hundreds to abandon their houses and businesses.

Joseph Manzi, a shop attendant in Ndeeba, said he lost over a million shillings when his bags of sugar, maize flour, rice and groundnuts got soaked. "The biggest problem is the clogged water channels and poor drainage.

Kampala City Council should work on this because we pay taxes," he said.

Robert Kimala, a boda-boda rider in Bwaise, said floods are hurting their business and income since they take long to subside. "Many people stop operating business at Bwaise whenever it rains, making us lose out."

Hawkers in the city centre cashed in on the lengthy downpour by selling umbrellas at between sh3,500 and sh5,000. Schools and shops were closed for most of the day in the affected areas. Child Care Primary School in Kibe Zone in Kalerwe did not open for business as water filled its classrooms.

Kawempe division boss Nasser Takuba explained that areas on the Northern Bypass flooded because the contractors did not unclog the water channels. He said the rising water forced many residents to relocate.

"I told them about the problem in the presence of works minister (John Nasasira). I asked them to at least put up a bridge because the pipes were too long but they said they were not contracted to work on the water channels," Takuba said.

He observed that culverts meant to take water along some channels between Bwaise and Kalerwe had been blocked by rubbish. "Out of the nine water channels, only two are working." However, the bypass has saved some parts of Bwaise from flooding following the enlargement of the Bwaise-Rubigi River.

Takuba said he expects the problem of flooding to be solved when the sh15b Bwaise-Rubigi water channel enlargement project starts in June. The World Bank promised to fund the project, aimed at enlarging the channel from its current width of five metres to between 50 and 90 metres.

The Fire Brigade commandant, Simon Peter Musoke, said they were on the look-out to respond to any eventualities caused by the downpour. Last week, a child was reported dead by drowning in Bwaise as a result of the heavy rains.

The rains yesterday, which lasted from Sunday night to Monday noon, did not only affect Kampala. According to the meteorology department in Entebbe, they covered most parts of the country except for Kabale and north-eastern Uganda.

Senior communications officer Jackson Rwakishaija said the rainy season, which had earlier started in parts of western Uganda, has now moved to the Lake Victoria bays. But according to the commissioner of meteorology, Stephen Magezi, the country has been experiencing El-Nino conditions since last year.

"The country is still seeing El-Nino conditions and these are likely to continue up to May," he said. He warned the population against staying in low-lying areas, particularly wetlands, since they are prone to flooding.

"Wetlands are waterways and people in such areas should come out as a way of disaster preparedness," said Magezi.

He also advised KCC to clear drainage channels which tend to get blocked by solid waste and soil.

"The channels will remain useless as long as the indiscriminate disposal of waste continues."

A study by British researcher Richard Taylor in Kalerwe and Bwaise indicates that incidents of cholera and floods are likely to go up with increased rainfall.

The report says floods contaminate the water in the spring water wells, which is the main source of water for Kalerwe residents.

Over 60% of Kampala's population stays in slums, according to Augustus Nuwagaba, a Makerere University lecturer and development consultant. Half of them do not have access to proper toilets.

This article can be found on-line at: <http://www.newvision.co.ug/D/8/12/710804>

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