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MPs: Restart Mara River poison probe

MEMBERS of Parliament yesterday rejected the Mara River pollution report and directed the government to form an independent team to conduct a fresh in-depth examination on the contamination which saw the river water turn black and occasioned large numbers of fish to die.



This came days after the 11-man national committee formed by VPO minister for Union and Environment, Dr Selemani Jafo, released its findings which instantly touched off a public outcry, with MPs describing it as illogical and a waste of public resources.

Prof Samwel Manyele from the Department of Chemical Engineering and Minerals at the University of Salaam who chaired the probe committee presented the report before MPs, whereupon the legislators said the report was poor and doctored due to a limited sample size.

Some of interviewees included in the report are not residing in the affected villages, some of them asserted.

Christopher ole Sendeka (Simanjiro) said that the House demands an independent committee of experts and MPs to get real answers on the pollution of Mara River. "This will help us in assuring the people of East Africa and outside that our fish are safe," he stated, advising that investigations should not only be limited to the specific part of the river in Tanzania since the river flows from Narok County across the border.

Prof Sospeter Muhongo (Musoma Rural) said that five other rivers whose waters flow into Lake Victoria merit being investigated as well, as the report just presented does not clearly state the cause of oxygen deficiency in the water, resulting in the deaths of fish.

He alluded to the contaminated water as having three layers, but the findings do not clearly state which layer was contaminated thus causing oxygen deficiency. "We also need to know the analytical facility used by the probe team in preparing the report," he specified.

Joseph Kasheku (Geita) dismissed the report out of hand, qualifying it as shameful by linking the deaths of fish with decomposition of living organisms in the wetlands of the Mara River, saying that this was a joke. "The government should form another probe committee that will come with concrete research findings," he declared.

Constantine Kanyasu (Geita Urban) said Mara River pollution was a sensitive issue and is likely to affect the fish processing industry in the zone. There is a need to come up with new findings that will leave no questions hanging, he stated.

He wondered if Prof Manyele's committee took samples from the various sources of the river, for instance how it connected increased animal wastes with deaths of fish as the animals have been grazing along the river for decades.

Mwita Waitara (Tarime Rural) raised concern over increased cancer cases in the Lake Zone, comprising around 80 per cent of cancer patients admitted at the Ocean Road Cancer Institute (ORCI) in Dar es Salaam. Research findings in Kenya are different from reports by our experts, he stated, arguing for a fresh investigation, similarly alluding to water being contaminated with mercury and other substances from the North Mara gold mining area.

Urging presidential intervention in the matter, the MP said in-depth investigation that will clear the first report linking the water pollution and deaths of fish with animal wastes is sorely needed.

Responding, minister Jafo promised to work on the MPs' recommendations, cautioning that some suggestions were unsettling for existing investments. In his presentation, Prof Manyele said the fish died after being deprived of oxygen due to accumulated dung and urine from livestock grazing in wetlands.

The probe team also found traces of oil which was later found to be relatively harmless, but further investigations showed that it resulted from the decomposition of living organisms in the wetlands of the Mara River. There were no signs of the presence of petroleum, the don affirmed.

Prof Manyele's panel included Dr Samuel Mwafenga, the NEMC director general and committee secretary, Dr Kessy Kilulya, the head of the Chemistry Department at the University of Dar es Salaam, Dr Charles Kasanzu from the UDSM Geology Department and Daniel Ndio, the director of chemical control and management at the Government Chemist Laboratory Authority (GCLA).

Others were Renatus Shinhu, the director of the Lake Victoria Basin Authority, Baraka Sekadende, director of the Mwanza centre of the Tanzania Fisheries Research Institute (TAFIRI), Dr Neduvotio Mollel from the Tanzania Plant Health and Pesticides Authority (TPHPA), Asnath Kauya from the President's Office, Yusuph Kuwaya from the regional administration and Faraja Ngerageza, an assistant director for Environment at VPO.

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