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President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni,  
The Republic of Uganda-Kampala

Your Excellency,

**OPEN LETTER TO THE PRESIDENT OF UGANDA TO COMMIT AGAINST DAM CONSTRUCTION AT MURCHISON AND UHURU FALLS**

The above refers

**1. Introduction**

We send you greetings and take this opportunity to thank you and your government for providing leadership to Uganda since 1986.

Up until now, your leadership has been critical to enabling our country achieve equitable and sustainable socio-economic transformation to meet national and international commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris Climate Change Agreement and others.

The above development goals, which your government has valiantly championed, are aimed at promoting environmental conservation, combating climate change and improving livelihoods especially for vulnerable groups such as women, youth, rural communities and others.

We are a consortium of civil society organisations (CSOs) working with ordinary Ugandans across the country. Our work gives us the privilege and honour to interact with ordinary citizens on a day-to-day basis.

As such, we often come face-to-face with the reality of the impacts of degraded ecosystems such as forests, wetlands, rivers, lakes, national parks, game reserves and others. Degradation of the above ecosystems has left thousands of communities in untold suffering.

It is against this background and based on our trust in your ability to provide the right leadership in environmental conservation that we have taken the unusual step of writing and directly appealing to you

**to unequivocally declare that your government will never build a dam at Murchison and Uhuru Falls or any other place in Murchison Falls National Park (MFNP).**

We request you to make this declaration of commitment as a gift to Ugandans for 2019. This will end fear among Ugandans and increase trust in your leadership.

We are confident and comforted by the fact that despite the many environmental conservation issues and other challenges our country is going through, you are still committed to promoting and safeguarding our critical biodiversity and natural heritage across the country. We appreciate your recent directives stopping those degrading wetlands, lakes and river banks, forests and others. Our hope is that you will go a step further to ensure that those directives and conservation laws are enforced and complied with.

## **2. Significance of Murchison Falls landscape**

Your Excellency, you will recall that Uganda signed the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) on June 12, 1992. On September 8, 1993, Uganda ratified the convention. This made the CBD part of Uganda's legal obligations for conservation.

Further, in 2002, the country developed and adopted a National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP). The plan provided a framework to guide implementation of the various articles of the CBD and mainstreaming of biodiversity into sectoral policies and plans at the national and local level.

In addition to the CBD and NBSAP, Uganda also has a number of laws including the 1995 Constitution, 2019 National Environment Act, 2019 Uganda Wildlife Act, the National Forestry and Tree Planning Act and others. All the above provide for regulation of the environment to promote biodiversity conservation among others in the country.

Despite the above legal framework, Uganda continues to face untold environmental degradation including from threats brought about by oil activities in the Albertine Graben.

To promote understanding of the importance of conservation and to address the challenge of lack of statistical (economic) values of our biodiversity, in 2017, the National Environmental Management Authority (NEMA) with support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) worked towards promoting the implementation of the CBD by conducting a study titled "*Economic Valuation of protected areas in Uganda: A case study of Murchison Falls Conservation Area and Budongo Central Forest Reserve*".

The study found that minus oil reserves in the area, the Murchison Falls and Budongo forest ecosystems have an economic value of over USD 60 billion (UGX 114 Trillion). The economic value of oil was not known by the time of the study but your government estimates to earn approximately USD 2 billion per year from oil for 20 to 30 years.

In addition, over 80% of Ugandans still rely on biomass to meet their energy needs. This is because electricity tariffs are too high. Electricity and oil cannot be compared to the biodiversity values of Murchison Falls National Park and Bugondo forest. We must protect our biodiversity from the dangers of dams, oil and others.

Specifically, the NEMA study highlighted the following economic values of the Murchison and Budongo ecosystems:

<b>Biodiversity of Murchison and Bundongo landscape</b>	<b>Economic value in UGX</b>
Value of timber stock	146 billion
Non-timber products (mainly wood)	4.81 billion per year
Non-wood forest products	5.5 billion per year
Medicinal and pharmaceutical value	2.2 billion per year
Soil erosion control	132 billion per year
Tourism value	110.4 billion per year
Carbon sequestration and storage value	3.8 billion per year
Option, bequest and existence value	30 Trillion
Relocation and rehabilitation value	114.4 Trillion
Watershed protection and catchment services	26.5 billion
Research and education	47 billion
Costs to the community	2.5 billion per year
Opportunity costs for MFCA (livestock & Husbandry).	4.8 billion per year
Opportunity costs for BCFR (sugarcane option)	20.4 billion per year
Income of the MFCA	2.2 billion (2008)

Your Excellency, from the above, it is clear that the Murchison Falls conservation area, Budongo forest and other ecosystems are more important for the well-being of Ugandans than the planned electricity dams and oil exploitation activities. Further, unlike oil which will get exhausted in 20 to 30 years, the economic values of the Murchison Falls conservation area and Budongo forest will last forever if they are well protected through conservation.

Harmful activities such as plans to build a dam at Murchison Falls should therefore not be permitted.

We therefore call on you Mr. President to unequivocally declare that no dam shall ever be built at the Murchison and Uhuru Falls as part of your commitment to promote conservation. Below, we summarise why we are making this call.

### **3. Why Murchison and Uhuru Falls should not be tampered with**

**(a) Only your word can be trusted by Ugandans:** In September 2019, the Minister for Tourism, Hon. Ephraim Kamuntu, indicated that cabinet had agreed to instruct the Electricity Regulatory Authority (ERA) to stop the feasibility processes by Bonang Power and Energy Ltd that precluded construction of a dam at Murchison Falls. This followed a call by ERA in June 2019 to interested stakeholders to submit comments on an application by Bonang Power and Energy to undertake feasibility studies for construction of a dam at Murchison Falls. There was a huge public outcry against the planned feasibility studies. This prompted Hon. Kamuntu to make the aforementioned cabinet pronouncement. However, the minister did not provide information as to whether the instructions to ERA to stop the feasibility processes were a government commitment or a mere statement that can be changed any time. As a result, Ugandans and all those who love nature continue to live in fear of the plans to develop a dam at the

Murchison and Uhuru Fall. We therefore ask you to publically commit that no dam will be built at Murchison Falls or any other place in the park.

**(b) The economic value of Murchison Falls landscape is a God-given gift to Uganda and should be protected:** Further, as earlier indicated, the 2017 study conducted by NEMA with support from UNDP on the economic value of the Murchison Falls conservation area and Budongo forest clearly indicates that the economic value of the above ecosystems is over USD 60 (UGX114 billion). It is noteworthy that the biodiversity values are benefits in perpetuity and are enjoyed by the majority equitably. This is unlike the benefits that will be enjoyed from the proposed dam and or oil developments. As you are well aware Your Excellency, todate, only over 20% of Ugandans have access to electricity despite huge investments being made in the sector. To make matters worse, over 90% of Ugandans still depend on biomass to meet their cooking energy needs because electricity is unaffordable.

On the other hand, conservation has conferred benefits on Ugandans. For instance, during reading of the 2019/2020 budget speech on June 13, 2019 at the Serena Conference Centre in Kampala, the Minister of Finance, Hon. Matia Kasaija, informed Ugandans that the tourism sector earned the country over USD 1.6 billion in the 2018/2019 financial year. The Murchison Falls remain one of the most iconic tourist attractions and it is the reason why the Murchison Falls landscape has been attracting some of the highest numbers of tourists in the country. This means that the falls contributed to the above tourism earnings. No serious country committed to equitable development would destroy such a vital tourism asset in exchange for electricity.

**(c) Oil threats to Murchison Falls landscape:** In addition, Murchison Falls and the entire Murchison landscape is under massive pressure from oil threats. For example, over 70% of the 400 oil wells under Total E&P (U) Ltd's Tilenga project are in Murchison Falls National Park. Infrastructure such as well pads, pipelines, roads, oil workers' camps, River Nile pipeline crossing and others that will be developed under the Tilenga project will fundamentally affect both the park and falls. Your Excellency, you should not allow another harmful activity such as the proposed dam to be added to the oil threats faced by the Murchison Falls landscape. This is more so because the benefits of conservation outweigh those of oil. For instance, at peak production, oil exploitation will earn the country approximately only USD 2 billion per year for the next 20 to 30 years while the benefits of conservation will be enjoyed in perpetuity.

**(d) Lack of diversity in energy mix:** Further, Uganda is continuing to invest heavily in hydropower at a time when the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is advising countries across the world to diversify their energy mix. This is because climate change could negatively affect sustainable energy supply for countries relying on single energy sources, especially hydro sources. Uganda is already vulnerable as information from ERA shows that as at May 2019, hydropower contributed 929.6MW to the energy mix. On the other hand, thermal, bagasse and solar power contributed 101.6MW, 96.2MW and 50.8MW respectively. Mr. President, there is no rationale for investing in more dams at the expense of biodiversity and tourism. Uganda should be aiming at tapping into other energy sources to diversify the country's energy mix.

This is more so the case because currently, technology to generate any amount of power from better sources such as solar and others exist. Investors are also ready to invest considerable amounts of money into this development model as they have done in countries such as Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria and several others.

- (e) **Excess power:** Further, it should also be noted that todate, ERA has failed to sell the excess power being produced by Uganda’s dams. During [the 2017 State of the Nation](#) address that you delivered on June 14, 2017, you said that Uganda is producing [surplus power](#). Indeed, the peak demand for power stood at 500MW then against a total installed generation capacity of over 900MW. Today, Uganda has a total installed generation capacity of over 1,182MW (as of May 2019). This means that Uganda’s surplus power has increased. The additional 600mw from Karuma dam will make the situation of excess power even more complex.

As you are well aware Your Excellency, todate, excess power is the single biggest problem that explains why Uganda’s electricity remains unaffordable and an obstacle to job creation. The few power consumers are made to pay for the excess power that is produced in the country for government to meet its loan obligations.

- (f) **Legal action and huge costs:** In addition, Ugandans have challenged the ongoing failures in the Tilenga oil project through courts of law. The main objective of the legal actions is to ensure that oil activities do not destroy biodiversity and livelihoods. With Ugandans ready to protect their biodiversity, it is likely that plans to destroy Murchison Falls will also be challenged in court leading to huge costs on citizens through high tax payments. Moreover, world leaders are also calling for biodiversity conservation. His Holiness Pope Francis is urging the world to call “acts such as the massive pollution of air, land and water resources, large-scale destruction of flora and fauna, and any action capable of producing an ecological disaster or destroying an ecosystem as ‘ecocidal’ and must not go unpunished.”<sup>1</sup> The Pope has called on the world community to recognise ecocide as a “crime” against peace.

- (g) **International shame:** Further, Uganda is a signatory to many international conservation agreements and conventions including the Paris Climate Change Agreement, the CBD, SDGs and others. All the goals emphasise conservation by avoiding activities that are harmful to biodiversity such as dams and any other industrial or infrastructural development in protected areas. Destruction of Murchison Falls through building a dam will make Uganda be in breach of the above international commitments. It will make Uganda look like a country that has no respect for nature at a time when the impacts of climate change are undermining our national development agenda while the global community and religious leaders are more united than before to take action to save Mother Nature and our common home from climate change. No responsible investor will invest in Uganda if the country does not respect international legal commitments.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-11/pope-francis-penal-law-justice-environment.html>

- (h) Climate change:** Uganda also continues to experience impacts of climate change. Environmental degradation caused by harmful development activities such as oil exploitation, deforestation and others are some of the biggest contributors to this climate change. As a result, flooding, landslides, loss of life, prolonged and or unpredictable dry weather conditions, water insecurity, declining agricultural productivity and others have been or are being seen. Uganda needs to promote environmental conservation by safeguarding our critical biodiversity and natural heritage including national parks, game reserves, forests, lakes, rivers, wetlands and others to mitigate climate change.
- (i) Pride and natural heritage:** In addition, Ugandans value their wildlife and protected areas. In a first ever survey from 2017<sup>2</sup> it was found that 80% of Ugandans believe that wildlife is “an important source of income for the country.” Sixty percent said “it is important for their national identity and heritage” and 56% said they are proud of Uganda’s wildlife. Fifty-eight percent said tourists help the Ugandan economy. This feeling of pride was even more visible during the public outcry against construction of the planned dam at Murchison Falls in June and July 2019. Uganda needs to protect its natural heritage that is important for Uganda’s national identity.

#### **4. Our appeal**

As part of our efforts to protect Murchison Falls and the entire Murchison landscape, we ask you to do the following:

- (i) Declare that no dam will be built at Murchison Falls or any other place in Murchison Falls National Park.** Your Excellency, you should address the country and commit that your government will never build a dam at Murchison Falls and or allow any other harmful activities in the Murchison Falls landscape.
- (ii) Cancel any contract with Bonang (or any other company) regarding the feasibility study.** In view of the fact that ERA had already invited the public to comment on Bonang’s application for a feasibility study for the proposed dam, we call on you and your government to cancel any undertakings with Bonang Power and Energy to avoid future legal liabilities that may be used as an excuse by government to change positions to allow a dam to be built at the Murchison Falls.
- (iii) Invest the funds meant for the dam into clean renewable energy:** We also advise government to invest the resources that would have been spent on the dam into clean renewable energy especially off grid solar that can meet the needs of poor and vulnerable groups such as women, youth, rural communities and others.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://wildaid.org/ugandans-value-their-wildlife-first-ever-survey-shows/>

Thank you,



Dickens Kamugisha,  
Chief Executive Officer-AFIEGO

**OTHER SIGNATORIES:**

No.	Organisation	Logo
1.	Oil Refinery Residents Association (ORRA)	
2.	Citizens Concern Africa (CICOA)	
3.	Action Coalition on Climate Change (ACCC)	
4.	Africa Institute for Energy Governance (AFIEGO)	
5.	South Western Institute for Policy and Advocacy (SOWIPA)	
6.	World Voices Uganda	
7.	Guild Presidents' Forum on Governance	
8.	Action Coalition on Climate Change (ACCC)	
9.	African Initiative on Food security and Environment	
10.	Buliisa Rural Development Organisation (BIRUDO)	

11.	Nwoya Women Association Against Environmental Degradation	
12.	Great Lakes Institute for Strategic Studies (GLISS)	
13.	Centre for Constitutional Governance (CCG)	
14.	Environmental Conservation Trust of Uganda (ECOTRUST)	
15.	Bunyoro Journalists Association	
16.	Centre for Energy Governance	
17.	Twimukye Womens Organisation	
18.	Graffen Organisation -Butimba	
19.	Youth Action for Environment -Kiryandongo	

**CC:**

- The Speaker of Parliament, the Republic of Uganda
- The Minister of Water and Environment
- The Minister of Energy and Mineral Development
- The State Minister for Tourism
- The Leader of Opposition in parliament
- The Chairperson, Natural Resources Committee of parliament
- The Chief Executive Officer, ERA
- The Executive Director, NEMA
- The Executive Director, UWA
- The Chief Executive Officer, Uganda Electricity Generation Company Limited (UEGCL)