

“We don’t have the future, we are doomed today unless we act now”

Interview with Mr William Amanzuru, winner of the EU Human Rights Defenders Award 2019

By: Moa Lindgren, Embassy of Sweden in Kampala

EU Human Rights Defenders Award. *Every year, the European Union in Uganda, the EU member states present in Uganda and the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Kampala award a Ugandan citizen who has made selfless and courageous contributions to the advancement of human rights in the country. This year, the award was given to William Amanzuru, the founder of the organisation Friends of Zoka, who fight to save the Zoka forest in Adjumani from the effects of illegal logging. The Embassy’s political officer Moa Lindgren met with Mr Amanzuru to learn more about the situation in Adjumani and the obstacles he and the organisation are facing, as well as what motivates them to continue despite threats and heavy surveillance.*

The Zoka forest, located in Northern Uganda, stretches over some 6 145 hectares in southern Adjumani District. It is the only tropical forest in Northern Uganda and the last natural forest along the belt of Albertine region. **The forest hosts some 75 per cent of the world’s bird and insect species, and hardwood trees such as mahogany and mvule can be found here. Sadly, it is because of these, highly sought-after trees that illegal logging continues to threaten the forest and its wildlife.** The Embassy of Sweden met with Mr William Amanzuru, co-founder of Friends of Zoka, to talk about the organisation’s work and Williams’ dedication to saving the forest, a dedication that was recently recognized as he was given the EU Human Rights Defenders Award. However, it has also meant death threats, surveillance, even attempted murder, and as a result, William can no longer live with his family. William openly told the Embassy all about Friends of Zoka, the illegal logging and how activism for the good of the environment has put his life in danger.

William was born in Lira but has lived and worked for the most part of his life in Adjumani District. He is married and has four children two biological and two adopted, with whom he loves to share his passion and knowledge for the environment. Commenting on the current environmental status and climate change, William says “We don’t have the future – We are doomed today if we don’t act now.” **His engagement for the environment in general and the Zoka forest specifically began when he, in 2015, noticed military vehicles entering the Zoka forest to bring loads of timbers and logs.** His suspicion rose with the number of military trucks and personnel in the forest, especially after observing few of the men were wearing uniforms and no trucks had license plates. The local government said they were unaware of what was going on, and unable to provide William with answers. Therefore, he took it upon himself to find out more and put an end to the exploitation of the Zoka central forest reserve.

He began raising community awareness by bringing the issue to the attention of local media, and soon enough some people in the communities surrounding the Zoka central forest reserve joined William’s efforts. **However, their meetings were repeatedly interrupted by security staff or police. “This was the first true sign that something was not right.” says William.** Instead, the group turned to WhatsApp, and named the chat “Friends of Zoka” – the organisation was born.

Various government officials were added to the chat, and some came to visit Zoka. William also went to Kampala and visited the parliament with the aim to talk to the speaker of parliament. By sheer luck, the Speaker was just leaving and getting into a car when William arrived and he asked to have five minutes to explain what was happening in the Zoka central forest reserve. She listened, and said she would follow up on the issue. **Four ministers were sent to Adjumani to audit and report back. However, once their report was finalised, it did not mention any of the information that William and the Friends of Zoka had given the ministers. Rather, it contradicted their stories.** Suspecting the government must be part of what was going on, Friends of Zoka were determined not to let it make them give up on their cause.

William explains that the **local communities surrounding the forest are not economically empowered**. This, he says, may be the reason some people from nearby villages have accepted to help the military personnel for money. And they are supposedly paid well, much more than the average income in the district. Friends of Zoka spread this information and made it public to the community as a way to make them stop assisting in the deforestation of Zoka. Unsurprisingly, this action angered some people as they felt they were denied the good income the military offered. Others, however, decided to quit. By this time, William had let Speaker of Parliament know that the ministers' report was incorrect but was disappointed and angered by the lack of response. Friends of Zoka once again turned to local media to raise the issue. They also engaged a group of people with bows and arrows in the forest which had the military retract. **By the help of the local community and media, Friends of Zoka managed to save some 30 per cent of the forest from deforestation.**

In 2017, it seemed the military had left and the deforestation for timber had stopped. But instead, however, large amounts of the endangered tree species *Azizelia Africana* were logged every day and transported out of Adjumani. "Two trailers with logs go for around 40 – 65 million Ugandan shilling, and in some extreme cases one single trailer goes for 40 million shilling itself" William informs. According to a research made by NTV on behalf of Friends of Zoka, **logging of trees is one of the most lucrative businesses in Uganda, and the value of some of the trees equals of even exceeds that of gold.**

Friends of Zoka decided to track the logs the 490 kilometres to Kampala and found they are stored near the police mechanical compound at Namave, staffed by Chinese and Korean nationals. The destination, however, is not within the country. **The logs are shipped to several places in Asia such as Vietnam, China and Korea, while others end up in Dubai.**

In Uganda, the laws prohibiting this type of activities are few and poorly implemented. Most people who Friends of Zoka have managed to identify and put to charge are released shortly thereafter with little or no consequences. They are also given back any tractors or tools seized at the time of arrest. Thereby, they can continue exploiting and are unlikely to be intimidated by the consequences.

In the process of tracking the logs, William and his colleagues began to understand just how well-thought out the operation of illegal logging in Uganda is. Before arriving at Adjumani, drivers are provided with fake registration papers asserting that the trucks contain logs transported from South Sudan. However, the trucks are empty and ready to be loaded with logs from around Adjumani. It was during a road block that William came across this information. He had stopped a driver who, upon confrontation, pulled out a gun asking for William Amanzuru. As he did so, a letter fell out of the car. William, frightened by the fact that the unknown man not only knew his name but pointed a gun at him, decided not to answer and instead picked up the paper from the ground. "I reached it towards the driver, but he refused to take it and told me to read what it said, claiming it was his clearance letter to come and collect logs" says William and continues "When I read [the letter], I understood the driver must be illiterate because the letter said the truck already contained logs from South Sudan." **Not knowing who William was, the driver kept asking for William Amanzuru and said that they will "get him", still holding the gun pointed towards William.** Considering the hostile behaviour and the fact that the man had a gun, William let him go on.

This is not the only death threat William has received. The most recent one, which is also the most serious, took place in January this year. William and some of his colleagues in Friends of Zoka had gone to



Mr Amanzuru after receiving the EU Human Rights Defenders Award 2019. Credit: Royal Norwegian Embassy in Kampala

Okawa to identify illegal loggers to make them leave the area and stop exploiting the natural forest. After walking 20 kilometres into the Okawa forest, the group came across five men who admitted they were hired by a woman by the name of Kevin Keliki, the sister of Member of Parliament Hon. Aza Alero, MP Moyo West. One of the men described Kevin's wealth and power in the community, saying that she has run the log business in the area for years. In fact, it has become her trade mark and she has expanded the market abroad through connections in Kenya. The main reasons of her power, the man explained, is her close relations with several elite personnel in Uganda, for example within Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) and Uganda Police Force (UPF). According to testimonies from villagers, William says **"Kevin is so dominant that she bribed off many attempts of arrest, she terribly intimidates the villagers of the area and promises to personally kill whoever will report her to authorities."** Further, Kevin claims to have built a cartel for her logging business which includes several officials like the District Police Commander (DPC), Local Council Five (LCV), Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), and Natural Resources (NA).

Upon confronting her, Kevin's initial reaction was to ask if they, William and his team, had come to arrest her and offering to pay however much they asked so that she could avoid arrest. However, the situation quickly changed once William introduced himself and the team. Kevin was no longer friendly and apologetic. Instead she began yelling all kinds of insults and threats at William. "She promised to kill me on spot saying it was an easy thing for her, she claimed that she had spoken with the LCV and the DPC, and were assured there was no team visiting the place, because of that she said, she was going to kill me and no one would know." William tells. Since Kevin was extremely aggressive and about to start a physical fight, William was advised by team members to get on a boda and leave. When he did, Kevin jumped in her car and chased the boda to run over William. Luckily, the boda driver managed to drive in between trees where Kevin's car was unable to follow. At a later point, they came across Kevin again, as she had blocked the road with her car. She was yelling, falsely accusing Friends of Zoka for stealing her tractor and ten million Ugandan shilling from her. **Additionally, she commanded the villagers to kill William and his team, and she would pay however much needed.** It was not until army and police officers from a nearby police post interfered that the situation calmed down a bit.

William filed a report of attempted murder and threatened violence against Kevin that same day. Her tractor was seized together with some hand power saws. In total, William has five cases registered with the Adjumani police. Apart from death threats and attempted murder, William has also had his home broken into in 2018, and all his belongings were stolen including clothes. In October 2018, two attempts were made to kidnap William's children from their primary school in Adjumani. **Events like these has made it impossible for William to continue to live with his family.** They now live in a different district and do not see each other often. At the award ceremony, William told the audience how his young son asked why he did not live with them anymore – A question which was heart-breaking for William to answer.

It is evident that William and his family suffer greatly from the threats and violence posed against them. When asked what keeps him going, William replies that he has many times decided to quit, but the next morning he wakes up missing it. **"It has become a part of me, the more time I take to understand nature, the closer I become to it"** he says. Other reasons keeping him motivated include the many encouraging messages from friends together with the smiles on his children's faces when he tells them about nature.

Meeting William, there is no doubt that his passion for and drive to save Ugandan forests from illegal logging is both genuine and strong. There is also no doubt that his actions cause anger among people involved in the profitable but illegal businesses in and around the Zoka forest. It takes courage, determination and a lot of sacrifice to continue fighting large, extremely profitable yet illegal businesses like the one in Adjumani. **Therefore, the EU in Uganda chose to recognise William's and Friends of Zoka's actions through awarding them the EU Human Rights Defenders Award 2019.** When asked about the award, William says it was very unexpected. "Even to be in the top three was something I could never expect" he says, and continues "When I looked up the two other finalists, I found they have come much further than Friends of Zoka in terms of organisational structure, webpage, offices and so on."

Friends of Zoka, at the time of this conversation, still does not have an office of its own but is secretly occupying space in within an NGO with a bigger office. This is risky, as the landlord is hiding the organisation and might be forced to terminate the contract without notice if it is brought to the attention of authorities, leaving William and the organisation without a place to work. This is, however, a risk they are willing to take considering the many break-ins in their previous offices. At the moment, William has no less than five cases reported to the police in Adjumani, several of which include break-ins and theft, together with the attempted killing of William and attempted kidnapping of his children. At the time of this interview, none of the cases had received any attention nor had they been subject to further investigation.

Receiving the EU Human Rights Defenders Award will help the organisation to spread their message and inform more people on what is going on in Adjumani, William says. The Embassy, together with the EU in Uganda, the other EU member states present in Uganda and the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Kampala, once again congratulate William and Friends of Zoka for their tireless efforts and engagements to save one of the last remaining indigenous forests in Uganda.