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How disagreements delayed Karuma dam completion

UEGCL declined to approve the dam's commissioning last November, saying the contractor failed to remedy works on several sections of the plant.

BY MARKO TAIBOT
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Lack of consensus between government and the contractor of the Karuma Hydropower dam in Kiryandongo District over fixing glitches in the plant has delayed its commissioning by more than a year.

Between January 2020 and June 2021, Sinohydro Corporation Ltd, the dam's contractor, made significantly slow progress from 97 per cent to 98.8 per cent.

Three months ago, following the routine inspection on June 25, Uganda Electricity Generation Company Limited (UEGCL) said the completion date for the country's flagship \$1.7 billion (Shs6 trillion) hydropower project had been pushed by a year to June 22, 2022.

Although UEGCL stated that the commissioning had been pushed for several months (a year) due to small but significant outstanding works, it noted that works on the 600MW dam sitting near Karuma Bridge on the River Nile were 98.8 per cent complete.

Recently, Ms Proscovia Njuki, the UEGCL board chairperson, told *The East African* that "the remaining works may look small, but are enormous in terms of what needs to be rectified."

She meant the remedial works that needed to be done after UEGCL (the government agency that is in charge of the project) challenged the contractor to address the defects in the dam, failure of which compromises the plant's safety, reliability and operation.

They include electro-mechanical works, which had quality issues such as electric and cabling defects that did not meet the specifications in the engineer's statement of requirements.

UEGCL complaints

UEGCL also raised concerns that Sinohydro Corporation Ltd, should increase manpower to fix the defects, speed up the works and ensure the project is completed within the 12 months extension.

Initially, the project was to be commissioned in December 2019, but it missed the target date, and an extension of 12 months (November 2020) was granted by the government.

In January last year, during a familiarisation tour by Ms Mary Goretiti Kitutu, the former Energy minister, said the project's total completion progress stood at 97 per cent while Mr Harrison Mutikanga, the UEGCL managing director, insisted that it would be commissioned in November 2020.

"The project is currently at 97 per cent and workers are just fine-tuning a few things and preparing to commission the machines, that is why we are at 97 per cent completion. We promised that



Karuma hydropower dam under construction in Kiryandongo District. PHOTO/FILE

by November, we are ready for commissioning," Mr Mutikanga said.

However, in October 2020 when the government okayed the contractor to go ahead and conduct wet tests on the plant, a month before the commissioning time, a bitter disagreement ensued between the government and Sinohydro over unrepaired defects on the plant.

Both the Owner's Engineer (OE - UEGCL's consultant firm) and the government accuse the contractor of doing shoddy work and insisted that unless the contractor corrected all the defects, it cannot be allowed to start tests or commission the plant since the gravity of the defects were severe and rendered the plant unsafe.

Sinohydro reacts

However, Mr Hou Fuqiang, Sinohydro Corp. Ltd deputy project manager, and also the project's chief engineer, said the impact of the disagreements had forced works to stall for several months.

According to him, "the changes brought in by the new OE messed us up. We were at 86 percent status when the new OE came in, procurement of all the equipment from China was complete and waiting for shipment to Uganda but we were asked to change the design and start making fresh orders of equipment to fit the new changes, this was very frustrating."

According to Mr Fuqiang, the change in the project design and scope meant a typical deviation from the initial project contract terms and conditions, which was unacceptable.

Whereas Mr Fuqiang insisted the plant was ready for commissioning by the end of November, UEGCL declined to approve it since the contractor failed to remedy works on several sections of the plant.

Responding to *Daily Monitor* in an email over the conflicts, Mr Albert Byaruhanga, the UEGCL's Karuma project manager, said the works in question form the heartbeat of the plant.

BACKGROUND

The construction of Karuma was launched in 2013 and was scheduled to be completed within six years in December 2019. However, due to delays in land acquisition for the transmission lines and reservoir pools, the project could not be completed in December 2018 as was anticipated forcing the government to agree to the contractor's one-year extension request to December 31, 2019. However, it could not be completed again majorly because of land acquisition challenges. The contract was extended to November 30, 2020, although both extensions were done at no extra

cost to the government. The project has three major high voltage transmission lines evacuating the power produced. These are; the 400 kilovolts (kV) Karuma to Kawanda line (248km), standing at 98.22 per cent completion level, the 400kV Karuma to Olwiyi Town in Nwoya District (55km) and the 132Kv Karuma to Lira (75km), standing at 95.74 per cent and 81.96 per cent completion level, respectively. The project will create four substations - at Karuma site, now standing at 97.7 per cent completion, Kawanda (97.9 per cent), Olwiyi (76 per cent), and Lira (97.7 per cent).

"If not completed satisfactorily, the safety, reliability and operability of the power plant are put at great risk resulting in frequent plant downtime, maintenance problems, loss of generation revenue and ultimately reduced durability. This can potentially erode value for money," Mr Byaruhanga wrote.

"No, it cannot, the contractor has to first remedy the non-conformances in the works before the generation of power can commence. This is of utmost importance to safeguard the power plant against risks associated with the non-conformances," he added.

UEGCL demanded the contractor to undo all the cables in the plant's generation unit since they do not meet the employer's specifications. The OE says the cables, fitted over two years, should be removed and be re-installed afresh.

Repeated attempts to seek comments from the OE, AF Consults authorities were futile.

However, Mr Andre Voboni, the senior project manager at AF Consults, recently told the government that they had tightened their grip on the contractor over the defects and errors, according to UEGCL's GNEWS magazine.

"If you do not supervise him and control him, he will try to benefit, maybe with the materials or with anything. For instance here in Karuma, they refused to bring a cooling plant so they poured concrete for 2 or 3 years at high temperature," he said.

You know placing temperature is not 27 degrees, it should be 18 degrees and below to avoid hydration and they just ignored it yet in the contract they have a cooling plant or ice plant because it costs money to bring it, they just didn't mobilise it, he added.

"They had an easy life where almost everything was approved. There were few nonconformity reports so the easy life is now over, but our approach is that we are sitting in the same boat and all we are requesting is that they complete the works according to the required quality and to contractual standards and specifications," Mr Voboni said.

Amid the delays, the contractor is now feeling the pinch of the series of postponements, which have seen the project whose construction period was five years, now running into eight.

Lockdown exposed parenting gaps - experts

BY RAJAB MUKOMBOZI

MBARARA. When President Museveni instituted the first lockdown on March 18, 2020 to curb the spread of Covid-19, schools were the first to be affected.

This meant that children were now in the hands of their parents for long.

Experts in Mbarara District say parents' ability to nurture their children was exposed as many failed to keep them at home.

Mr Gabriel Ahimbisibwe, the district education officer, said when schools were opened for the candidate classes, few learners turned up.

"In our 2020 Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE), out of 6,131 pupils that registered to sit for PLE in the district, 313 did not sit for their examinations. Reports indicate that some got married or got jobs," Mr Ahimbisibwe said.

Dr Alice Mwesigwa, a lecturer and the president of Mothers Union Ankole Diocese, said Covid-19 came with so many challenges in families.

"A parent's primary responsibility is taking care of a child but they started crying barely a month into the lockdown. Most parents have entrusted their roles with schools and government to the extent that some want their children to go back to school when safety has not been guaranteed," Dr Mwesigwa said.

"Some of the primary roles of a parent include providing an environment that is safe, teaching morals and values, getting to know your child and ensuring discipline but what is being witnessed in our communities exposes weakness in parenting roles," she added.

Former Mbarara Woman MP Emma Boona said the closure of schools was a wake up call for parents.

"Parenting roles have been left in the hands of schools, caretakers even during holidays. Children get out of their parents' direct care as early as two years to start daycare. What has happened during this lockdown is a wake up call. We should go back to our cultures and take responsibility for our children, not schools, TVs and caretakers," Ms Boona said.

Ms Kellen Ayebazibwe, the district inspector of schools, said some parents pushing for the reopening of schools are not interested in education.

"Most of the parents I interact with want schools opened to keep children away because they have become a burden. This shows some level of parents' irresponsibility," she said.

Ms Hamida Nalubega, a parent in Kakoba, Mbarara City, said she had to rescue her son from the streets in August last year.

"He started coming home late after playing with friends. The day I tried to discipline him, he never came back. We traced him for a week until a neighbour sighted him with fellow street children and informed us," she said.

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