

Minister says reforms to solve nature conservation hitches

MERCY MALIKWA
STAFF WRITER

Minister of Tourism, Wildlife and Culture Michael Usi has said reforms that the ministry is undertaking will address capacity and welfare challenges national parks and wildlife reserves face.

He was speaking on Tuesday when he visited Lengwe National Park in Chikwawa where he was briefed on several challenges in the natural resources and wildlife conservation sector.

Said the minister: "Lengwe National Park, like many other parks and game reserves, has numerous challenges.

"But the reforms we are undertaking at the ministry seek to address those challenges so that the capacity and welfare of staff here at Lengwe and other national parks and wildlife reserves improve."

Usi also commented on encroachment, saying: "When we regard the communities surrounding the national parks as important stakeholders, we will realise the dividends we want."

"We need to manage the human/wildlife conflict because the people are encroaching because they have needs that must be met. There is need for a strategy that will address their



Usi (in red belt) and other officials view rangers houses

PHOTOGRAPH: MERCY MALIKWA

needs."

Lengwe National Park parks and wildlife assistant Shaibu Kadewere said they have

inadequate field equipment and staff, who also have poor housing.

He said: "The park is 887 square kilometres but only less

than 20 rangers look after it. "Accommodation is also a challenge. Some staff live in houses that are in deplorable condition."

During the minister's visit, the Shire Valley Transformation Programme presented uniforms, boots, tents and GPS trackers.

The programme's community development coordinator Stanley Khaila said the irrigation project draws water from the Shire River which is being degraded by siltation and deposits from the surrounding community; hence, the programme provides support to the management and conservation of the catchment. ■

MEC to consult on by-elections

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The recently-gazetted public health guidelines aimed at curbing the spread of Covid-19 have put Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) in a tight corner on how to conduct by-elections in vacant constituencies.

Before the public health guidelines, which include banning of gatherings of over 10 people, came into effect, the Presidential Task Force on Covid-19 gave MEC a go-ahead to conduct elections in areas that have fallen vacant.

MEC has to hold by-election in Mangochi West, Mangochi North East, Phalombe North, Lilongwe North West and Karonga Central to ensure that people in those areas have members of Parliament (MPs) representing them in national development.

MEC spokesperson Sangwani Mwafulirwa in an interview on Tuesday said the electoral commission will have to engage relevant stakeholders on the way forward after which they will issue a statement

He, however, could not say when the consultations will take place.

Said Mwafulirwa: "We appreciate that the constituents need MPs to lead them, but there is a need to take all necessary precautions to avoid putting people's lives at risk by breaching laws aimed at curbing the spread of the pandemic."



A woman casts her ballot in a past election

PHOTOGRAPH: NATION

Attorney General (AG) Chikosa Silungwe in a separate interview advised MEC and the Ministry of Health to see how best the elections can be managed, particularly on the issue of managing public gatherings in campaigns.

He said: "It is possible to have an election but there will have to be a conversation on how the by-elections will be conducted."

Silungwe maintained that public gatherings have been defined as a grouping of not more than 10 people.

On his part, Malawi Congress Party (MCP) spokesperson Maurice Munthali said the party will follow whatever MEC and government decide.

He said: "We implore MEC to consider the magnitude of the pandemic while at the same time look at how we can comply with the constitutional right of the people to choose somebody to represent them. MCP is ready to contest in the

elections, should they be organised."

United Democratic Front secretary general Kandi Pandambo also said his party is ready for the election, adding that parties, through the Centre for Multiparty Democracy, already left the decision in MEC's hands during a consultation meeting last week.

However, he said just like in the June 23 presidential elections, measures can be put in place on how best the elections can be conducted.

Democrat Progressive Party (DPP) spokesperson Nicholas Dausi and DPP secretary general Greselder Jeffrey did not pick up their phones when called for their comments.

Meanwhile, Independent Political and Social Analysts Thinktank founder Ken Msonda, who is also a DPP member, said it will be hypocrisy for government to hold elections that will expose thousands of people

to Covid-19, particularly when it is barring religious gatherings of more than 10 people.

He said government needs to review the limitation on religious gatherings, saying places of worship provide people with solace or answers during a crisis. He called on religious groups to seek court redress saying the current guidelines are a fight against churches.

Government limited all public gatherings to 10 people except for funerals, National Assembly deliberations, and meetings on Covid-19.

Elections bring thousands of people together, especially when politicians undertake campaigns.

Prior to the June 23 presidential election, government limited public gatherings to 100 people. But the campaigns saw thousands gathering during rallies and voters also went in large numbers to cast votes. ■

Police summon Jomo, 2 others over Mayaya attack

JONATHAN PASUNGWI
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Police in Blantyre on Tuesday summoned Blantyre's Bangwe Nthandizi Ward councillor Issac Jomo Osman and two others in connection with Human Rights Defenders Coalition (HRDC) member Billy Mayaya's attack in October 2019.

Osman, a Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) member, and Elijah Mwala were later released after questioning by Blantyre Police Station while DPP youth director Yona Mlotha remained in custody for alleged assault occasioning actual bodily harm.

Southern Region Police spokesperson Ramsey Mushani confirmed the summoning of the three for questioning on allegations that they perpetrated clashes between then governing DPP youth cadets and HRDC during protests in Blantyre that left Mayaya and four others injured.

He said: "I can confirm that we summoned them for questioning on the Billy Mayaya attack. Osman and the others recorded statements under caution and were released as investigations continue. But Yona Mlotha was arrested for assault.



Recorded a statement: Osman

PHOTOGRAPH: NATION

"So the others have recorded statements under caution on the same charge. We are also hunting for other people in connection with the matter."

Osman has been arrested twice previously in connection with perpetuating violence since DPP was booted out of power by the Tonse Alliance in the June 23 fresh presidential election.

The attack of Mayaya and four others attracted criticism as police failed to arrest perpetrators despite video clips that went viral showing Mayaya being attacked by some youths in DPP regalia.

Seven days after the attack, police arrested 20 people in Lilongwe for allegedly looting during the same HRDC demonstrations aimed at forcing former Malawi Electoral Commission chairperson Jane Anshah to resign. ■