

Lake Victoria, Africa's largest and the world's second-largest freshwater lake, shared by Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, has become a hotspot for environmental crime, according to a new report from the Pretoria-based Institute for Security Studies (ISS). He added: "The government officers who are supposed to ensure that the environmental regulations are followed often opt to take a bribe or look the other side when crimes are being committed." Why organized crime is thriving on the lake Maritime scholars argue that crimes in lakes, oceans and seas require the convergence of various elements: the presence of ready labour to carry out the crimes, the presence of a largely ungoverned water mass where illegalities can occur, and the allure of profit. At the local level, committing a crime in the lake requires the availability of the actor; their boat rowing or driving skills, and the intent/opportunity to profit from illegal fishing in the lake. But proximity to Lake Victoria and the skills acquired to survive around the lake, such as fishing, swimming and boat rowing, can also be deployed in the commission of crimes for personal benefit. Yet, those who have the right skills (navigation) and tools (boat) to engage in activities such as illegal fishing often claim ignorance of the law when apprehended for trespassing in another country's waters. Illicit activities in Lake Victoria Lake Victoria is home to different fish species including the Nile perch, tilapia, mudfish and silverfish (dagaa). Crimes on the water sometimes take place in specific areas due to the convergence of rich fish species at those locations or the presence of highly profitable endangered species on specific islands within the lake. This can attract illicit actors interested in benefitting from the exploitation of these natural resources. Hotspots that attract high traffic due to the abundance of fish include Mgingo Island at the water borders of Kenya and Uganda. Islands such as Remba (Kenya) and Goziba (Tanzania) attract high movement of people from East Africa and beyond due to the convergence of other illicit markets, such as the marijuana and charcoal trades, the trade in counterfeit goods, and the in-flow of undocumented workers, most of whom are youth and women who are forced into sex work, forced labour or working at entertainment venues. A fisherman destroys a canoe that is not fit for fishing on the lake under the watch of the FPU. COURTESY PHOTO/FPU. The study notes that the lack of enforcement of fisheries regulations allows fisherfolk to not only legally sustain their livelihoods but also engage in various forms of illegal fishing. These violations include operating without the required gear or nets, fishing in prohibited zones, lacking necessary licenses or permits, and targeting juvenile fish, among other crimes. To make the situation even worse, the enforcement officers in the three East African countries, the report notes, are also known to use violence and brutality in the lake to commit robberies of fish, fishing gear, fuel and boats, thus further promoting illegal fishing and environmental hazards. For example, the deployment of the Fish Protection Unit in Ugandan waters of Lake Victoria since 2017 has led to various incidents, including extrajudicial killings, destruction of illegal fishing nets and gear, confiscation of fish, arrests and convictions, and the seizure of boat engines. Fishermen from Kenya and Tanzania have faced severe consequences, including drowning, theft of fish, and substantial fines. Meanwhile, sand mining in Lake Victoria continues along the shores and inlets of the lake in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. At the local level, the key actors in sand mining are young men from these shores, local contractors and transporters who use it in the construction industry. But the Chinese investors have also sought authorization from state authorities to conduct dredging to expand ship routes, especially for oil tankers that ferry petroleum from Kenya to

Uganda. While dredging companies have been permitted, cases of Chinese companies being involved in sand mining through dredging emerged in 2018 when a Chinese firm known as Mango Tree Group was authorised to excavate sand at various sites in Uganda. The dredging was to allow for the docking of large ships and to enable water transport to other East African ports. However, Ugandan data indicate substantial sand exports to China. A Daily Monitor analysis from 2014–2017 indicated a lack of regulation and oversight based on confusing export numbers. Uganda, for instance, exported 14 tonnes of sand in 2014, earning US\$4,800. In 2015, Uganda exported 22 tonnes of sand from the shores of Lake Victoria, earning US\$68,000; in 2016, it exported 19 tonnes, generating US\$1,074; and in 2017, it exported 3 tonnes, bringing in US\$43,000. Sand mining in Uganda not only supplies the construction industry but also produces gravel used in various applications, including mixing with chicken feed, glass manufacturing, and water filtration in China. Chinese and Nigerian sand mining companies play a crucial role in this industry, with operators seeking specific types of sand that are graded, packed, and exported according to their requirements. Interestingly, unlike sand for construction that is displayed to attract buyers, gravel has a specific market that remains a secret. Other actors in the illicit value chain of gravel in Uganda include local politicians, security personnel and brokers. Local media in Uganda report that Ugandan sand is exported to China via the Busia and Malaba borders. It is packaged in large containers and "branded in a way that complies with the law," suggesting that paperwork may be falsified to facilitate this environmental crime, notes the report. Patrick Otuo, a socio-economic researcher at the Kenya Marine and Fisheries Resource Institute noted that the wanton targeting of large and mature Nile perch that are sexually mature has an effect on the viability of Nile Perch and other species. Going forward, the researchers call for the harmonization of the enforcement mechanisms used by Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania to enable them to cooperatively tackle transnational organised crimes, including environmental crimes such as the transit of charcoal, timber and illegal fishing in Lake Victoria. Documented crimes include; illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, driven largely by the rising demand for Nile perch swim bladders (fish maw) in the Chinese market, as well as the illegal mining of sand, charcoal, and timber. The existence of cross-island networks of charcoal trade in Lake Victoria has also been established: Motor boats transport charcoal produced on Lake Victoria islands such as Koome in Uganda to the shore from where it is delivered to busy marketplaces such as Ggaba and Luzira in Kampala. Dr. Okumu said environmental crimes in Lake Victoria thrive due to the readiness of actors willing to sustain the illicit markets in illegal fishing, sand harvesting and the charcoal trade, as well as the limited government presence and low probability of arrests in these spaces. Dr. Willis Okumu, a senior researcher at ISS who focuses on transnational organized crime in East Africa and a lead researcher for the study, revealed during an online seminar on August 14, that illegal fishing constitutes the largest portion of criminal activity on Lake Victoria. Clashing operational mandates The study, conducted between July and November 2023, attributes the rise in illegal activities to the lack of a unified registration system for small boats, which has facilitated their use in such practices. "The Beach Management Units are complicit in the commission of these crimes on the lake because they control the landing sites and beaches," Okumu said, adding that in Uganda, BMUs often ask for bribes from Kenyan fishermen to fish in Ugandan waters. The Lake Victoria islands such as Migingo (Kenya/Uganda), Remba

(Kenya) and Koome (Tanzania) have become havens for the smuggling and trafficking of timber of various kinds. Charcoal from Uganda is supplied to Kenyan islands and distributed to towns such as Mbita, Migori, Homabay, Muhuru Bay and Sori. The 68,800 sq km lake that could easily pass for an inland sea, serves as a vital transport corridor, a source of fresh water, fish, and hydroelectric power, bolstering the economies of the three East African countries. The study on transnational threats to Lake Victoria was launched in 2023 by the Institute for Security Studies through the ENACT (Enhancing Africa's response to Transnational Organized Crime) project, in collaboration with the UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM) and it was aimed at understanding better the threats and their impacts. The boats are manually loaded and unloaded by traders. Possible solutions