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Residents oppose leasing of land for Billionaires' Club project



Relatives and friends of Italian billionaire Flavio Briatore on holiday in Malindi. The Italian wants to put up an exclusive club for the extremely wealthy. The businessman is said to have been leased part of the Malindi Marine Park for part of the project. Photo/FILE

By DANIEL NYASSY dnyassy@ke.nationmedia.com
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Plans for a Sh500 million club in Malindi have hit a brick wall after residents opposed a 25-year land lease to the investor by Kenya Wildlife Service.

Italian billionaire Flavio Briatore wants to put up an exclusive club for the extremely wealthy. The businessman is said to have been leased part of the Malindi Marine Park for part of the project.

But the plan is hanging in the balance after residents protested, during a meeting at Malindi Marine Park on Tuesday, over the lease to Keniaku Ltd, a company owned by Mr Briatore, for Sh1.5 million a year.

The Italian, who owns the luxurious Lion in the Sun Retreat in Malindi, intends to build a club similar to another he owns in Sardinia, Italy, which can only be accessed by the super rich.

The Billionaire's Club would be the only one of its kind in Africa. The residents' meeting had been called by area MP Gideon Mung'aro after he was accused of involvement in the lease deal.

There was tension at the venue before and during the open door meeting. Armed KWS rangers guarded the entrance following reports that a group opposed to the lease would hold a demonstration.

Received demos report

“There was so much tension that I almost cancelled the meeting. I had received reports of demos but my seniors in Mombasa urged me to proceed with the meeting,” said Malindi and Watamu marine parks warden-in-charge, Mr Dickson Korir.

Malindi Boat Operators Association chairman Twalib Ali Abeid said the allocation of a section of the marine park to the billionaire should be revoked because many people benefited from the park.

Beach Curio Sellers Association chairperson Consolata Akinyi said they could not allow the beach to be sold to a private developer as this would deny women and youth access to the area where they earn their living.

And Swahili Council of Elders chairman Abdalla Alaus said the leased land was an important environmental conservation area with rare indigenous medicinal plant species.

“The marine park is the oldest in Africa, a camping site and an educational centre visited by hundreds of students annually as well as a turtle conservation and rest centre,” said a National Environmental Management Authority official, Mr Salim Ali.

Mr Alwy Abeid said the lease should be revoked because procurement procedures were not followed. According to Cap 271 of the laws of Kenya, he said, tendering and valuation should be open and involve interested parties, but this was not done.

Residents Omar Gohran and Omar Alwy said the building of the club would deny local people access to the marine park.

Malindi mayor Samson Mapinga and his deputy, Mr Fuad Rudeiny, also opposed the lease, saying procedures were not followed, no consultations were made and that the council would challenge it in court if it was not stopped.

“We have formed a taskforce after we noticed fake plans and projects were being approved,” said Mr Mapinga. “The council had been told that the project involved the construction of KWS staff houses.”

Mr Rudeiny said Mr Mung’aro had been accused of involvement in the lease. But the MP denied the allegations, saying it was only KWS that could lease its land to other people.

“How can I sell KWS land? I am not party to it,” said the MP, who produced a copy of the Hansard from Parliament showing how the deal was done.

A week ago, KWS director Julius Kipng’etich admitted at a public meeting at the marine park that 3.5 acres had been leased to Mr Briatore for 25 years. “This is KWS land, which we are mandated to lease by law,” Dr Kipng’etich said.

At Tuesday’s meeting, Mr Korir said the investor was given 3.5 acres for parking and other facilities while the club would be built on the former Jambo Club land, which the billionaire bought many years ago.