

BY FRANKLIN DRAKU

Middle conflict and the plight of Uganda's external labour market

KAMPALA. When the first airstrike rained in on Iran, it was thought to be a US, Israel-Iran war, and probably would have less impact on distant countries. However, Iran's response drew the ire of the entire Middle East when it struck targets in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates and others and with that, what was thought to be a middle east affairs quickly hit the global economy, both big and small.

For Uganda, some of the biggest impact is being felt in the fuel supply and external labour market, with shipping hit and airlines grounding to halt as far as Middle East destinations are concerned.

Winnie Akello, a Ugandan working in Jordan said the war has brought fear especially in countries that are being hit by Iran in retaliatory missile strikes. She said migrant workers like her are terrified by the war because being in foreign land, you can't know where to hide.

"This is not my first time, even last year the sound of missile was so terrifying because Jordan is in between Iran and Israel I couldn't sleep at night. Even when we receive assurance from government and our employers, we are still terrified because you are not sure where they will strike next," she said.

The Middle East region provides the largest destination for Ugandans employed externally, with Saudi Arabia taking the largest share, followed by the United Arab Emirates. Both countries have been hit by Iran in retaliatory strikes, forcing them to close their airports.

Across the region, data from the ministry of gender, labour and social development which regulates labour externalization, indicates that 317,555 Ugan-

dan workers sought jobs in the Middle East in 10 years up to December 2024, of which 84.45 percent or 268,203 were women, while just 15.5 percent or 49,332 were men.

According to the ministry, the countries being hit by Iran, who have since closed their airports are the biggest destination for Ugandan migrant workers. For example, estimates from the ministry of labour indicate that from 2022-2023 an estimated 150,000 Ugandans were working in Saudi Arabia and the latest figures put the numbers to more than 200,00, while as of April 2025, more than 100,000 Ugandans are estimated to reside and work in the UAE.

Mr Aggrey David Kibenge, the Permanent Secretary of the ministry yesterday said the numbers in the two countries are substantial and account for the biggest Ugandan migrant workers in the Middle East.

"What I know is that we have the biggest number of people in Saudi Arabia. Over 200,000 that we have cleared. UAE as another is the second largest destination after Saudi Arabia and the numbers are close to 150,000 Ugandans who are in UAE. Although not all of them were cleared by the Ministry, but the statistics that the embassy has of the Ugandans in UAE is close to 150,000. So those two have the biggest numbers," Kibenge said.

Back in the country, external labour recruitment agencies are stuck with people who had been cleared to fly out of

the country, but are unable to go because of the turmoil in the Middle East.

Ian Kaijuka, the managing partner at Optimal Manpower Placement, and a board member of the Uganda Association of External Recruitment Agencies said the impact of the war is real, especially for Uganda.

He said though he is not sure of the figures, thousands of Ugandans who should have flown out of the country for work are stuck, with no immediate end to the conflict in sight.

He said on daily basis, the ministry of gender, labour and social development, that clears the external labour recruitments has been clearing between 1000 and 1500 Ugandans daily to fly out for employment. He said these are now stuck within the country.

"Previously, the ministry has been clearing an average of about 1,000 to 1,500 migrant workers per day. So what that means is that those are not able to

travel and some companies had already booked tickets and the owners or the candidates are not able to travel now," he said.

"Then, of course, with the airlines, it is now going to be dependent on when stability resumes for them to be able to give the green light on the travel schedules," he added.

While Kibenge who said he was out of the country and could not put his fingers on daily clearances and gave the general figures, officials within the ministry in charge of external employment did not provide the specifics of how many Ugandans are cleared to work abroad daily. Hillary Talemwa, the officer in charge of external labour referred this publication to the airport authorities who also did not have the data readily available, of people who are traveling out for employment.

"The figures you are asking can only be obtained from Entebbe Airport and Immigration office because the people we clear here at the ministry do not necessarily fly on the same day or the following day, so we cannot provide that information," he said.

While it is not clear as to how many Ugandans who have been cleared and should have left the country are still trapped in the country because of the war in the Middle East, based on the estimates of daily clearance of between 1000 and 15000 Ugandan daily by the labour ministry, it is believed that at least

5000 Ugandans who had been cleared might have been stranded within the country.

Our attempts to get figures from external recruitment agencies proved difficult because those who we were able to get through to them declined to offer numbers on the figures.

One who spoke on condition that his company name and his own name not be exposed said his entity was stuck with more than 50 Ugandans who had been cleared.

"I can tell you I even paid for tickets and they were supposed to fly on Monday, but all the airlines canceled their flights to Dubai and Doha. Financially it is so draining on me because now I have to offer accommodation for them in Kampala, which was not planned for," he said.

Asked where the clients were being accommodated he declined to reveal, said he did not want them to be exposed.

Ugandans trapped in Middle East

Kaijuka meanwhile said while for on Ugandans who are yet to travel, being cleared, there are those who are in the Middle East and are in constant danger. He said as the association, they asked their members to ensure that the safety of the workers they take abroad.

"However, there are also those who on the other side, are worried of safety in the areas of Qatar, Bahrain, Saudi, the UAE in general. Because a see the news, some of these targets even to civilian sites. You've seen instances, like hotels being hit, some residential areas, could be hit by stray missiles that will go to unintended targets. However, we have encouraged all members to get in touch with the migrant workers..." he said.

FOREIGN REMITTANCES

Data from Bank of Uganda indicates that in the 12 months to 2025, remittance inflows surged to \$1.6b, up from \$1.4b the previous year, a 14 percent increase. However, with the no end to the war in sight, this inflow may be affected.