

Relief as 43 students return home

After enduring 48 hours of a rigorous journey, 43 students finally landed at Entebbe International Airport safely.

BY PAUL ADUDE

The 43 students from Ahlul Bayt International University in Tehran, Iran, breathed a collective sigh of relief as they finally completed more than 48 hours of travel from Tehran, to Entebbe last evening.

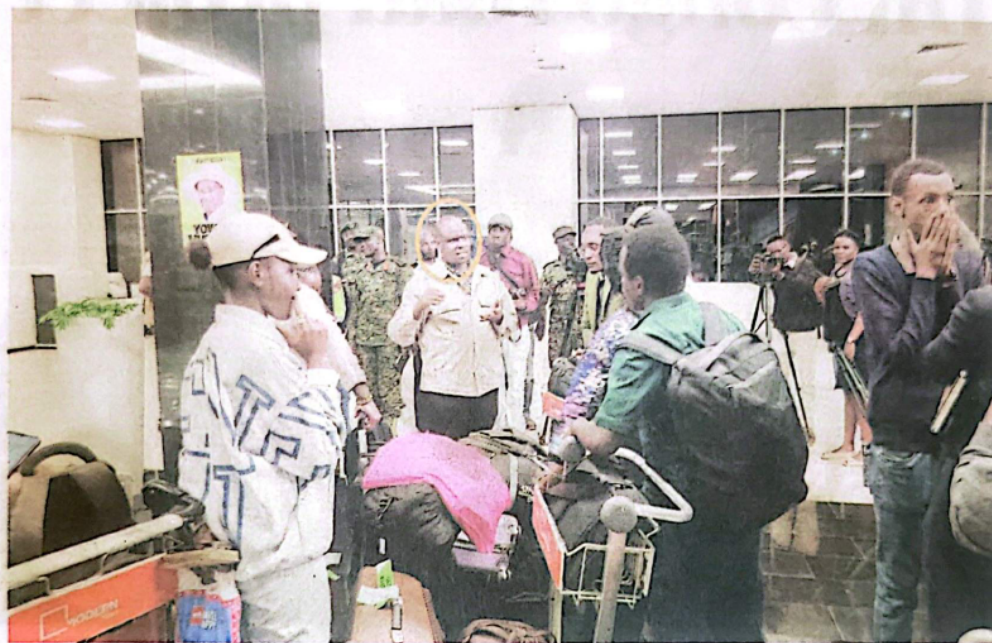
As the war between the joint Iran/Israel forces and Iran intensifies, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in collaboration with the Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF), repatriated the first batch of Ugandan students who were caught in the crossfire of the ongoing bombardment.

Government records from Xplore Travel Services show that the students departed Istanbul Airport yesterday at 7:35 am, landed at Bole Airport in Addis Ababa at 3:45 pm, and touched down in Uganda at 5:45 pm. Their safe arrival marked the end of the first rescue mission, a journey that demanded courage and endurance.

The group was received at Entebbe International Airport by State Minister for Gender, Labour, and Social Development, Mr Balaam Barugahara, alongside officials from UPDF, State House, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

While addressing the media after the group's arrival, Minister Barugahara revealed that the students numbered 51 in total, but eight chose to remain in Iran.

"When the war broke out, our ambassador in Iran, Twaha Matata, reached



Gender state minister, Balaam Barugahara (circled) addresses the students who were rescued from Iran upon their arrival at Entebbe International Airport yesterday. PHOTO/PAUL ADUDE

eign affairs minister. They were about 51 in one university, but eight decided to remain behind, willingly. The President approved the return of the 43 who were willing," he said.

Mr Barugahara further noted that government is working to evacuate a second batch of 53 students currently stranded at another university in Iran, which he declined to name.

Ms Sarah Mayanja, a second year student pursuing a Bachelor's in Architectural Engineering, said although the journey was long and exhausting, they arrived unscathed.

"We approached the Ambassador

Choosing to stay.
This isn't the first time government has come to help us having been helpful even with the 12-day war in Iran. However, after the 12-day war, many failed to return for their studies since they couldn't afford air tickets back, as we are all on scholarships. That's why the eight students and those at Al-Mustafa International University (MIU) in Qom remained — Mr Aloysius Segawa, International Relations student.

the embassy in Ankara and the Foreign Affairs ministry to evacuate us. We traveled by bus for about 14 hours from Tehran to the Turkey border. We were scared but we kept in touch with the ambassador who kept encouraging and promising us that things would be well. We soon reached the Turkey border where we found embassy officials," she said.

Mr Isaac Nimwesiga, the chairman of Ugandans in Iran, expressed gratitude despite the ordeal.

"We had to set off for Istanbul. It was also a lengthy journey, but we managed to reach there. It took around 15 hours, but later we were received in a hotel

guided by Major General Bob Ojok, and with the help of the embassy in Turkey, we had a comfortable stay. Today, we left Turkey for Uganda," he said.

Some students, however, appealed to government to provide provisional study opportunities in Ugandan universities, especially for those nearing completion of their courses, rather than returning to Tehran after the war.

Mr Barugahara assured that government would make provisions for all students to be flown back to Iran to complete their studies once the war subsides.

Journey back home

A few hours after Israel and the US struck Tehran, the students endured a harrowing bus ride from the Iranian capital to the Turkey border.

Alone on the bus for 19 hours on the road, changing buses through three major provinces; Qazvin, Zanjan, East Azerbaijan, the students arrived at the Gurbulak border post at noon on Sunday.

They were made to wait another 12 hours before being cleared to enter Turkey; they were frightened until they reached the Gurbulak border post, where embassy officials received them and later transferred them to Istanbul.

In our Wednesday edition, the students recounted how they braved a 950km journey filled with explosions and uncertainty.

Different students, speaking by phone to *Daily Monitor*, shared their experiences at the border, where they underwent rigorous checks unlike anything they had ever seen.

"We went through three checkpoints, but one after the other became hard...," one student, who preferred not to be named, said.