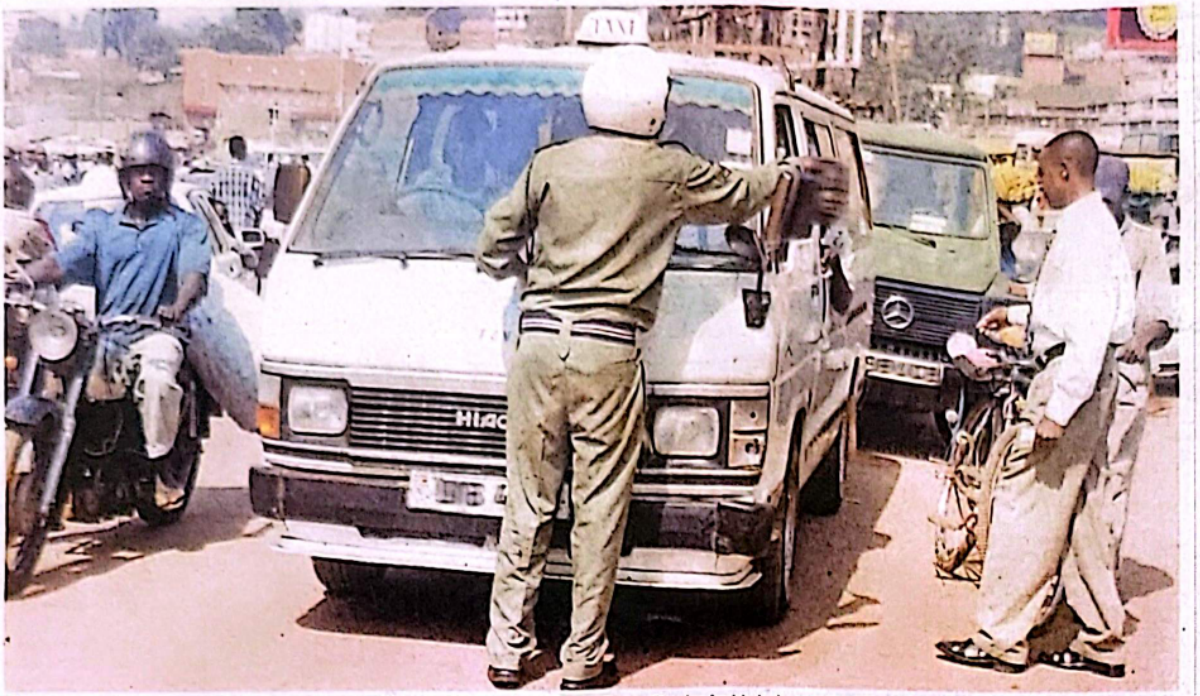


During traffic stops, motorists should remain seated in their vehicles during interactions. Staying inside helps ensure the driver's safety and maintains a controlled environment. PHOTO/FILE

Know your legal rights during a traffic stop

For many Ugandan motorists, being stopped by traffic police is a routine part of driving. But uncertainty about legal rights and proper procedures can turn a simple traffic stop into a stressful encounter. Here is what every driver should know to stay safe, compliant, and informed.

BY GEOFFREY OYET OKWERA

On his way to Gulu, northern Uganda, Jack Alele was flagged down by a traffic officer on the busy Bombo Road. Following the law, Alele stopped immediately. However, he brought his vehicle to a halt in a risky spot on the highway, putting himself and other road users in potential danger. Noticing this, the officer directed him to move a short distance off the main carriageway to a safer location. Alele complied, parked properly, and stepped out of the vehicle, ready for routine traffic questioning, while other cars sped past him.

A similar situation occurred on the Kamdini–Lira route when a traffic officer stopped motorist Steven Lugard, citing his worn-out tyres as a safety hazard. The officer instructed Lugard not to continue his journey to Lira until the tyres were replaced.

After a brief discussion, they reached a practical resolution: Lugard replaced the worn tyre with a spare he had in the car, allowing him to continue safely.

These encounters illustrate the delicate balance between enforcement and practicality on Uganda's roads, where motorists and traffic officers must navigate safety concerns while applying the law reasonably.



KNOW WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Ask for the reason: You have the right to politely ask why you are being stopped.
- Request identification: Traffic officers should clearly identify themselves and their authority.
- Stay safe: Remain seated, keep doors locked, and only step out if instructed.
- Refuse illegal requests: You are not obliged to pay bribes, hand over personal items unrelated to verification, or allow searches without proper cause.
- File a complaint: If you feel an officer is acting outside the law, you can report the incident to the Directorate of Traffic and Road Safety, the Uganda Police Professional Standards Unit, or your local police station.
- Document the interaction: If possible, note the officer's name, badge number, and any details of the stop.

Why awareness matters

For many motorists in Uganda, interactions with traffic police are routine. Drivers are frequently stopped for checks ranging from licence verification to vehicle inspections and traffic control. Yet, despite how common these interactions are, many motorists remain unaware of their legal rights and obligations when flagged down by a traffic officer.

This lack of awareness often creates uncertainty at the roadside. Some drivers panic, others feel intimidated, while a few react defensively, fearing harassment or unjust penalties.

In certain cases, what begins as a simple traffic stop escalates into an unnecessary confrontation, largely because neither party clearly understands the boundaries set by law.

At the centre of these encounters is a critical but often overlooked issue: understanding where a motorist's responsibility ends and where the lawful authority of traffic police begins.

Knowing your rights not only protects motorists from abuse but also promotes safer roads and respectful engagement between the public and law enforcement officers.

The legal basis

Under Uganda's Traffic and Road Safety Act, traffic officers are legally mandated to stop vehicles for lawful purposes, including checking compliance with traffic regulations, inspecting vehicle roadworthiness, verifying driving permits, and enforcing safety standards.

Motorists are legally obliged to comply with lawful instructions, but they also retain rights to safety, transparency, and recourse if they believe an officer is acting outside the law.

Stay inside, stay safe

Michael Kananura, community liaison and public relations officer at the Directorate of Traffic and Road Safety, advises that when flagged down, motorists should first look for a safe and convenient place to pull over before bringing the vehicle to a stop.

"This simple precaution helps protect both the motorist and other road users, ensuring that everyone remains safe before complying with the officer's instructions or answering questions," he explains.

Kananura adds that motorists should remain seated in their vehicles during interactions. Staying inside helps ensure the driver's safety and maintains a controlled environment. At bus traffic check points, drivers are also expected to formally register their details, present valid identification badges, and produce route charts for verification. Kananura notes that these measures are not meant to inconvenience drivers but are critical for maintaining road safety and orderly traffic management.

Guidelines for different vehicles

For medium and heavy omnibuses, officers board vehicles to determine offences and engage with passengers. This allows them to check for overloading, missing documentation, or unsafe behaviour while educating passengers on road safety. Standard Operating Procedures prohibit officers from sitting in an offender's vehicle except during a formal escort to a police station, reducing the risk of misconduct and promoting professionalism.

When passengers are present, engagements must be visible and audible to everyone, safeguarding both officers and motorists. Officers approaching heavy or commercial vehicles should do so from the appropriate side, ensuring the exchange remains formal and compliant.

Follow the rules, protect lives

James Mulakha, a seasoned driving school instructor, advises motorists to strictly observe road traffic guidelines as a fundamental step towards maintaining order and discipline on the roads.

"These guidelines are meant to keep all road users safe and ensure the best driving practices are followed," he says. Compliance protects not just drivers, but also pedestrians, passengers, cyclists, and other motorists, creating a safer and more responsible road environment for everyone.

Knowing your rights

Motorists have rights if they feel an officer is acting beyond their legal authority. They may politely ask for the reason for the stop and request to see proper identification.

They are not obliged to hand over personal items unrelated to verification, pay bribes, or consent to searches without proper cause.

In cases of misconduct or perceived harassment, motorists can report the incident to the Directorate of Traffic and Road Safety, the Uganda Police Professional Standards Unit, or their local police station.

Keeping a record of the officer's name, badge number, and details of the interaction can help support any formal complaint.

By understanding both their responsibilities and their rights, motorists can navigate traffic stops safely, protect themselves and other road users, and promote a respectful, professional environment on Uganda's roads.

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