

## Tribute

# Santa Mary Laker was a diplomat par excellence

At the time of her death, Santa Mary Laker was Uganda's Deputy High Commissioner in Kigali.

BY FREDERIC MUSISI

**A**mbassador Santa Mary Laker Kinyera, who succumbed to cancer on Tuesday at the Uganda Cancer Institute, Mulago, will be laid to rest at her ancestral home in Lacor-Akurukwe Village on the Gulu-Nimule Road in Amuru District on March 14.

A funeral service will be held at Our Lady of Africa Church in Mbuya next week on Thursday, followed by a vigil later that evening in Naalya, in Kira Municipality. She is survived by a husband and a son.

News of her death, months shy of her 57th birthday, shocked and touched not just her colleagues, but even those who merely crossed paths with her.

She was one of the remaining handful of career diplomats; individuals who grew through the ranks. From Foreign Service Officer (Third Secretary) to Second Secretary to First Secretary to Counselor to Minister Counselor to Ambassador, in an ecosystem weighed down by nepotistic appointments, political rejects, and relatives of the politically-connected in the clientele patronage system.

This dysfunctional state of affairs has lowered work morale in the once-coveted Foreign Service, promoted unprincipled rivalry, and fractured work relations both at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs headquarters in Kampala and at several missions abroad.

Long-long ago, would-be diplomats, even those who were snuck in, would start out at the headquarters, getting hands-on training and tapping into the vast experience of senior colleagues before being posted abroad. Today, many entrants join with express instructions for posting abroad. The domino effects are everywhere to see.

Ambassador Laker, according to colleagues, always kept her head high in this swampy state of affairs and tried to steer clear of the endless and corrosive dogfights in the Foreign Service. She was steadfast and principled and a beacon of hard work and professionalism.

She was approachable, a good listener who respected the viewpoints of colleagues, and generally breathed life into every work station she was assigned to. Were it a normal system, her legacy would inspire other diplomats to strive for a more harmonious co-existence.

At the time of her death, she was Uganda's Deputy High Commissioner in Kigali, Rwanda, where she was assigned sometime last year, replacing Ambassador Margaret Kedisi, who clocked retirement age.

Prior to the reassignment to Kigali, she was the head of the International Economic Cooperation Department in the ministry. She was recalled to the headquarters in early 2024 as a middle ground after months of diplomatic meltdown at Uganda's embassy in Washington DC ignited by the arrival of a new Head of Mission. Previously, she

had served under Ambassador Mull Kande, who was dropped during the December 2021 ambassador reshuffle and replaced by Ms Robbie Kakonge.

Ambassador Kakonge was first holed in Kampala due to budgetary constraints to travel to DC. She eventually arrived in DC in mid-September 2022 by the time the embassy was preparing for the US-Africa Leaders' Summit convened by former US President Joe Biden. President Museveni was one of the 45 African Heads of State invited for the summit scheduled for December 13-15.

Fast forward to the morning of December 13, as President Museveni's jet was scheduled to land at Dulles International Airport in DC in the early afternoon, Ugandan diplomats, like all others, were frantically running in all directions.

Up until that point, Ambassador Laker, as the Chargé d'Affaires/Deputy Ambassador, was the most senior diplomat at the Mission, in charge of running the embassy affairs, at least which required interaction with their American hosts. Ambassador-designate Kakonge had since arrival in September been ig-

nored by the White House to present her diplomatic credentials.

An ambassador's credentials is a personal letter addressed to the Head of State of a receiving State by the Head of State of the sending State. It bears the signature and seal of the President or King of the sending State. Presentation of credentials by an ambassador-designate to the Head of State of the receiving country officially marks the commencement of their diplomatic tour.

At the eleventh hour, the White House notified the Ugandan embassy that Ambassador Kakonge had been slotted an appointment to present her credentials to President Biden on the morning of December 13. Good news as it sounded, however, there was one challenge: the White House and Dulles International Airport are about 40 minutes apart, other factors like traffic kept constant. Ambassador Kakonge would not attend to the White House business and then be at the airport in time to welcome President Museveni, as is the norm.

What appeared like Ambassador Laker studiously stepping up to the occasion of directing the course of the day turned into a nasty state of affairs, involving spurious whistle-blower reports of financial impropriety and management at the Mission. The American hosts were bemused by the melodrama that exposed their ineffective supervisors in Kampala, while Citi Bank temporarily froze the embassy accounts as allegations were thrown back and forth.

Ambassador Laker returned to Kampala with her head held high, never one to hold a grudge.

An alumna of Kings College Budo, she enrolled at Makerere University in the early 1990s for a degree in Social Sciences. In 1994 she joined the once-coveted Uganda's Foreign Service, starting out

at the headquarters in the Africa and Middle East department between 1995 and 1999, where she specialised in handling bilateral and regional integration issues.

In 1998, she was the Special Assistant to the Minister of State for Regional Cooperation, at the same time working as a core member of the Ugandan delegations during the negotiations preceding the establishment of the East African Community Treaty.

In 2000, she was a member of the inter-ministerial taskforce set up to facilitate the return of Ugandan children abducted to Sudan by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). This was a time when Uganda and Sudan, under former strongman Omar al-Bashir, were at loggerheads. In 1999, the two governments turned to former US President Jimmy Carter to help in mediation, in which they agreed to take steps to restore diplomatic relations and promote peace in the region, but that did not help matters.

## 1994

The year Santa Mary Laker joined the once coveted Uganda's Foreign Service.

It is argued in some circles that Sudan warmed up to the idea of President Carter because it had just been slapped with heavy US sanctions, including a trade embargo and blocking government assets for sponsoring terrorism.

The convergence point of the two warring sides was the South Sudan peace process, which attracted the eyes of the international community. In July 2002, Khartoum and SPLA signed the Machakos Protocol (signed in Kenya), which culminated in the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) which ended the civil war.

From 2002 to 2007, Ambassador Laker served as Second Secretary and later as First Secretary at Uganda's mission in Copenhagen, Denmark. Between 2007 and 2009, she headed the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (Igad) and Horn of Africa Division at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, during which period she was also Uganda's Focal Point for Igad matters.

In 2009, she was seconded to the State House of Uganda, where she served as Head of the Diplomatic Affairs Department in State House. In 2011, she was reassigned as Counsellor and the first Chargé d'Affaires of Uganda's Embassy in Ankara, Turkey. From there, in 2014, she was cross-transferred to New York to buttress the President of General Assembly (PGA) office. Uganda's then Foreign Affairs Minister Sam Kutesa was President of the 69th session of the General Assembly.

After Mr Kutesa's PGA tour in 2015, Ambassador Laker was reassigned back to the State House Protocol Department, from where she was designated to DC.

Santa Mary Laker, PHOTO/MO-FA

### COMMENDABLE SERVICE

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