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Entebbe Airport security scanner is a nightmare

Returning from a recent trip, an experience at Entebbe International Airport left me with a bad taste in my mouth.

It was not with immigrations, which is the usual culprit in rants about bad experiences at airports.

In fact, going through immigrations took under 15 minutes, during which time I noticed a large, shapeless crowd milling about the area between baggage collection and the exit. Preoccupied as I was, with thoughts about life outside the airport, I paid the crowd no mind and finished my business with an immigration officer.

It is only then, striding merrily with my single piece of carry-on luggage in tow that I was struck by the awful reality of what this enormous crowd blocking my exit meant; behold! Scores of recently disembarked passengers were gagged into an enormous queue, scrambling to get their luggage into a single scanner in the so called customs area.

Another delay! This one more difficult to swallow because it was so meaningless! Forcing scores of weary travelers to line up (again!), to pass all their belongings through a single obsolete scanner, manned by an equally overwhelmed single staffer was unfathomable. Ostensibly, this was a mandatory security and customs check.

Did anyone think this through carefully? Granted, every airport has green and red custom channels. But green is for travelers who have nothing to declare and, therefore, should be waved through without causing more grief and congestion to a fraught situation.

Unless Entebbe airport has become the smuggling capital of the world - and even if it was, a cursory scan by a work-weary officer would hardly grab the illicit goods-how is it possible that every traveller, without distinction is literally being treated as if they have contraband to declare to customs?

At best this is a felonious crime of insensitivity, being visited upon returning citizens, tourists, investors and the business community travelling to a country so much in need of people to invest in and show off its sites of magnificence and beauty.

Apparently, it is of no consequence to the thinkers and implementers of this incredulity that baggage is already vigorously scanned at the port of departure and need not be subjected unduly to the same process on arrival; worse, to have only one machine groaning under the burden of servicing several hundred passengers daily simply makes no sense.

One can suppose that if it broke down, things would escalate really badly into physical searches of everyone's luggage?

Dear whom-it-may-concern, kindly put an end to this nightmare at Entebbe International Airport.

Even if customs is an important part of our revenue stream, this is no way to go about it. Reinstate the stringent checks only when suitable arrangements like more scanners and personnel are available to minimise the gross inconvenience to passengers.

A common sense approach would also go a long way in signaling that Entebbe International Airport has made it into the 21st Century; there were women with children, obvious tourist groups, elderly travelers, all herded into that queue without a shred of consideration. As well, there I was, with only a tiny piece of hand luggage; a clever guess would be that I had nothing to declare, or hide (since I am not a diamond smuggler) and, therefore, had no reason to be hustled with such ruthless abandon. We can agree that security checks and all kinds of other checks at the airport, are tedious, but essential in ensuring our safety, and that no illegal items are being smuggled into the country.

However, we must balance this value with our other strategic core values like making Uganda a world renowned investment, tourist and hospitality destination. A close second to that is the importance of courteous and considerate welcome rituals that civilised societies generally nurture, to differentiate themselves from the unwashed hordes.

We are people who greet visitors with open arms; not the slap in the face that currently awaits weary travelers at Entebbe Airport. It is no surprise that customer experience ratings have dived; room for improvement can start by banishing this ridiculous scheme.

The writer is a partner with Barenzi and Company Advocates