

Mob justice is a form of extrajudicial punishment in which a person suspected of wrongdoing is humiliated, beaten or, in many cases, killed by a crowd.

BY MUDANGHA KOLYANGHA

In the Bukedi Sub-region, long known for its rich culture and vibrant community life, a troubling phenomenon has re-emerged, the rise of mob action.

Once widely condemned as a social scourge, the practice has gained new ground in villages, towns and even urban centres.

Traditionally, mob action involves communities taking the law into their own hands, often resulting in unlawful punishments, including beatings, stoning, or even death.

In many cases, police response times are slow, while arrests are often delayed or lack follow-through.

As a result, some community members have resorted to vigilantism, convinced that justice must be swift and severe, particularly in cases that threaten their sense of security.

Bukedi North, comprising Budaka, Kibuku, Pallisa and Butebo districts, has been particularly affected. What began as a collective response to crime has spiralled into a troubling trend that has left communities divided and anxious.

The North Bukedi regional police spokesperson, ASP Wilfred Kyempasa, attributed the resurgence to limited public understanding of the justice system and its procedures.

Why mob action is making a comeback in Bukedi region

"The local communities think that taking the law into their own hands is the best solution, which is outright wrong. They don't understand how the justice system works," Mr Kyempasa said.

Bail dilemma

Law enforcers also fault the Judiciary, arguing that the release of suspects on bail often frustrates communities.

"This leaves the community completely frustrated despite adducing evidence, only to be let down because the evidence is insufficient to sustain the case," Mr Kyempasa said.

He explained that mob action is often driven by suspicion and misunderstanding, particularly regarding police bond, under which suspects may be temporarily released before appearing in court.

"As police, we have condemned the rising cases of mob justice, which is becoming a common means of dealing with suspects in the region. Most of those killed are linked to theft of livestock and poultry," he said.

His remarks follow several incidents in which suspects have been lynched by angry mobs across the region.

One such case involved Yokana Seku, a 40-year-old resident of Bulalaka Village in Butebo District, who was allegedly beaten to death by a mob on suspicion of stealing goats.

It is alleged that on February 22, unknown individuals stole three goats from Loma Musibika in Kigwere Village,

Nasenyi Parish, Kabwangasi Sub-county. The matter was reported at Kabwangasi Police Station.

Police, accompanied by canine units, tracked and recovered the carcasses of the goats before proceeding to the suspect's home. However, he was not present at the time.

After the police withdrew, members of the community reportedly tracked him down and assaulted him. He was later rescued by local leaders and rushed to Kabwangasi Health Centre III, where he succumbed to his injuries.

"As the police, we are deeply concerned about the ongoing incidents of mob justice.

We urge the public to uphold the principle of presumption of innocence and allow officers to conduct proper investigations," Mr Kyempasa said.

Police also emphasised that the fight against crime can only be won through cooperation between communities and the law enforcement officer, including reporting cases and engaging in dialogue, rather than resorting to violence.

Decline in trust

Residents attribute the rise in mob justice to declining trust in both the police and the courts, alongside growing perceptions of corruption within the criminal justice system.

"The lack of trust in the police is associated with a willingness to engage in mob justice, while perceived corruption undermines confidence and encourages participation in such acts," Moses Wairagala, a resident of Budaka, said.

He added: "Initially, people were concerned about livestock theft and vandalism. But as crimes escalated—with burglaries and violent incidents becoming more frequent—desperation set in."

The situation has worsened in recent years, driven largely by persistent theft of livestock and poultry.

"This frustration has pushed desperate residents to turn to mob action in search of justice," he said.

Budaka County MP Arthur Wako Mboizi said weak laws have contributed to the trend by failing to deter offenders.

"This trend of mob justice is due to the

weak laws applied to these criminals. People have become frustrated and resorted to mob action," Mr Mboizi said.

"We cannot entirely blame the police for this upsurge. The issue lies with policymakers who have failed to enact tougher penalties," he added.

Mr Mboizi warned that lenient sentences encourage offenders.

"These people are stealing with impunity because of weak laws. We need to review them and impose harsher penalties, including longer jail terms," he said.

Mr Mboizi also noted that while the police have intensified community policing efforts, their impact is limited by the legal framework.

Frustrated community

Residents say the resurgence of mob justice is rooted in growing frustration with both law enforcement and the wider justice system. Many believe the authorities are either ill-equipped to handle rising crime.

Stories of delayed police response, corruption and an overburdened court system have eroded confidence in formal channels. Tensions often reach a breaking point when suspected criminals are caught in the act or when communities believe justice will not be served.

"Sometimes criminals are known to the community, but they keep getting released by the police. People get fed up and decide to take matters into their own hands," said Samuel Mwidu, a local leader.

CRIME STATISTICS

Data from the 2015 Afrobarometer survey indicates that one in six Ugandan adults either took part in mob justice during the preceding year or said they would do so if given the opportunity. Police statistics show that between January and October 2024, Bukedi North recorded 21 cases of mob action across the four districts. Budaka registered the highest number with 11 cases, followed by Pallisa (five), Kibuku (three) and Butebo (two). During the same period, the region recorded 25 murders linked to domestic violence.