



Fatumah Nalweyiso, who had started selling food items, lost her entire stock to the fire. PHOTOS/SHABIBAH NAKIRIGYA.

Kabaka's visit brings hope to Katwe traders

As the smoke clears and the ashes settle, Katwe Market stands between loss and recovery. Its traders continue to wait, rebuild, and hope. But they do so with renewed strength, fortified by the knowledge that their king has seen their suffering and pledged his support.

BY SHABIBAH NAKIRIGYA

The acrid smell of smoke still hung over Katwe Market, a pungent reminder of the fire that had reduced decades of hard work to ashes in a matter of hours.

For the more than 200 traders who lost their livelihoods on the evening of March 15, the days that followed were filled with despair and the daunting reality of starting over from nothing.

But amid the rubble, a glimmer of hope emerged.

Just days after the inferno, Kabaka Ronald Muwenda Mutebi II, the monarch of the Buganda Kingdom, walked through the charred remains of the market.

His arrival was a powerful statement of solidarity, a reminder to his subjects that in their moment of greatest need, they were not forgotten.

For the traders of Katwe, the Kabaka's visit was an affirmation of the deep bond between the kingdom and its people.

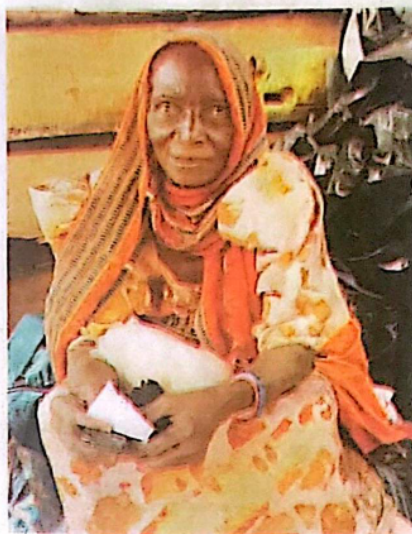
Return to work

Standing amid the debris, the Kabaka directed traders to begin reconstructing their stalls and resume work without delay, acknowledging that most depend on daily earnings to feed their families. Every day spent idle was another day without income.

The Kabaka immediately tasked Rexba Limited, the body responsible for managing royal markets, to work with traders on recovery efforts. Israel Kazibwe, the kingdom's information minister, confirmed the process had begun.

"Rexba has started registering affected traders to assess how best they can be supported," Kazibwe explained. "The Kabaka's directive is to ensure that traders return to work as soon as possible."

This swift response stood in contrast to the uncertainty that often follows such disasters. While officials spoke of waiting for investigations, the Kabaka's intervention was immediate and decisive, a leadership style rooted in proximity to the people.



Nalongo Nagalabi, an 82-year-old traditional medicine vendor's inventory was reduced to ashes.

A Market steeped in history

Katwe Market is not merely a collection of stalls; it is an institution with deep roots in Buganda's history.

Established in 1954 by Kabaka Edward Muteesa II, the market was originally conceived to support widows and low-income women.

Today, it is one of several markets under the Kingdom's management, alongside Kasubi, Nankulabye, Kalerwe, and parts of Wandegaya.

Within its bustling corridors, matooke dealers, charcoal sellers, fish vendors, welders, and traditional medicine practitioners operate side by side. It is a microcosm of the Kingdom's vibrant informal economy, where generations have built their lives.

For George William Sevume, a matooke dealer who has worked in the market for more than 35 years, the market was more than a workplace. When he received the call that fire had broken out on that Sunday evening, he rushed to the scene.

By the time he arrived, flames had al-

COUNTING LOSSES

Across Katwe Market, the human toll is immeasurable. Fatumah Nalweyiso, who had shifted from selling food to groceries, lost her entire inventory. "I had six sacks of food. All of them were destroyed," she said. "Now I am trying to operate again, but with very little capital."

Perhaps no story is more heartbreaking than that of Nalongo Nagalabi, an 82-year-old traditional medicine vendor who has worked in Katwe Market for more than three decades. When she reached her stall, everything had been reduced to ashes.

Now, at 82, she finds herself penniless.

"I am at zero," she said, her voice trembling. "Even a small container to operate from would help me survive."

ready spread rapidly from the section occupied by traditional medicine vendors.

His losses were staggering: over 180,000 bunches of matooke reduced to ashes, alongside \$54m in cash he had kept in the market for safekeeping. "We no longer trust the roads to carry money back home, so we keep it here. Now everything is gone," he said quietly.

The nightmare

For many traders, the tragedy was compounded by a failed response in the critical early moments. Gerald Ssenkungu explained that when the fire broke out, most traders had already left for home. They rushed back to salvage what they could, but at the gate, the security officer refused entry, fearing looting. By the time access was granted, the fire had intensified beyond control.

Even the firefighters failed them. "The first two fire brigade trucks arrived without water," Ssenkungu recounted. "It was the third truck that had water, but by then, everything had already been destroyed. That is when the nightmare truly began."

Preliminary investigations suggest the fire may have been triggered by a power outage followed by a voltage surge when electricity was restored. But for those who lost everything, such findings offer little comfort.

Rebuilding from ashes

For the traders of Katwe, the Kabaka's visit was not merely symbolic; it was a lifeline. In Buganda culture, the Kabaka is a father to his people, a custodian of their welfare, and a unifying force in times of crisis. His presence sent a clear message: the Kingdom stands with its people.

The Kabaka's directive to Rexba Limited to register affected traders was a practical step toward meaningful support. By documenting losses and assessing needs, the Kingdom is laying the groundwork for assistance that goes beyond empty promises. For traders who have not yet received tangible help from other quarters, this process represents their best hope.

Levis Ssenkungu, the market manager, noted that traders have always contributed fees for maintenance services. "We have always maintained security, including a police post and guards," he said. "But this incident has shown us that more needs to be done."

Despite the immense losses, signs of resilience are emerging. Makeshift structures are rising from the ashes, driven by the knowledge that every day of inactivity deepens hardship. "We have started reconstructing our stalls," Ssenkungu said. "It is not easy, but we have no choice."

Still, without financial support, recovery will be slow. The registration process initiated by Rexba Limited is therefore critical, offering a pathway to targeted assistance that can accelerate rebuilding.

A Kingdom's promise

For the traders of Katwe, the Kabaka's visit was a turning point. In a single afternoon, a monarch transformed despair into hope, replacing uncertainty with a clear path forward. His directive to resume work, coupled with the support of Rexba Limited, has given traders reason to believe that recovery is possible.

"We just want to get back on our feet that is all we are asking for. But our hopes have been raised by the Kabaka's visit at this our darkest hour. He has reaffirmed to us that no fire can ever destroy our bond," Nalweyiso says brightly, ending up.