

National News

Nandutu becomes the first high-profile government official to be convicted in regard to the iron sheets scandal that rocked the country a couple of years ago.

BY JULIET KIGONGO

The Anti-Corruption Court yesterday convicted former State Minister for Karamoja Affairs Agnes Nandutu for dealing with suspect property, in a landmark ruling that underscores accountability in the management of public resources.

In a detailed judgment, Justice Jane Kajuga found that Nandutu, who is also the Bududa District Woman Member of Parliament, unlawfully received and kept 2,000 iron sheets meant for vulnerable communities in Karamoja Sub-region.

"I am satisfied that the prosecution has adduced evidence beyond reasonable doubt that Nandutu received 2,000 iron sheets from OPM [Office of the Prime Minister] offices in Namanve," Justice Kajuga ruled.

To that effect, Justice Kajuga went on to cancel Ms Nandutu's bail before sending her to Luzira prison, from where she will be brought tomorrow to receive her sentence.

She faces up to seven years in prison. Nandutu becomes the first high-profile government official to be convicted in regard to the Karamoja iron sheets scandal that rocked the country a couple of years ago.

It was the prosecution's case that between June and July 2022, the former minister dealt with the iron sheets marked OPM by receiving them from the OPM stores and storing them at her private farm in Mukono District.

Evidence presented during the trial, including testimony from her political aide, showed that the iron sheets were collected on her instructions.

Documentation such as delivery

Why Nandutu was nailed in Karamoja iron sheets scandal

notes, issue vouchers, and store records further supported the prosecution's case.

"The prosecution has proved that Nandutu held the iron sheets, and this element is satisfied," the judge ruled.

The offence of dealing with suspect property requires proof that an accused person handled property they knew or had reason to believe was obtained through an offence.

The court found that the iron sheets in question fell within this definition.

Justice Kajuga established that the 2,000 iron sheets were part of a larger consignment of 10,000 procured under a Shs39.9 billion government programme aimed at empowering vulnerable communities in Karamoja.

The court held that while 10,000 iron sheets had been requisitioned for the official launch of the programme, evidence showed that only 1,000 were used for that purpose, with the remaining 9,000 diverted to unintended beneficiaries.

The court rejected Nandutu's defence that the iron sheets were intended for disaster victims in Bududa District or for northern Uganda, noting that no documentation or requisition supported her claim.

"There is no evidence that OPM provides iron sheets as relief items to Bududa, and no documents were produced to show that the 2,000 iron sheets were meant for that region," the judge held.

Further, the court noted that authorities in Bududa only became aware of the iron sheets after the scandal came to light, weakening the defence's argument of good faith.

"The 2,000 iron sheets were public property purchased with public funds and intended for public use. Their diversion was unlawful," she said.

The judge also pointed to evidence



Former State Minister for Karamoja Affairs Agnes Nandutu before the Anti-Corruption Court in Kampala yesterday. PHOTO: JULIET KIGONGO

that the allocation of the iron sheets stemmed from instructions by then minister Mary Goretti Kitutu, but emphasised that such directives did not legitimise the distribution.

"It is clear that iron sheets meant for Karamoja Affairs could not be distributed to any other region," she added.

On the question of knowledge, the

court found that Nandutu, by virtue of her position, knew or ought to have known that the iron sheets were irregularly obtained.

"As minister, she was privy to the budgeting processes and aware of the rightful beneficiaries," Justice Kajuga said. "Any reasonable person in her position would have known."

BACKGROUND

Ms Nandutu's former boss, Dr Mary Goretti Kitutu, is equally still facing related charges in regard to the diversion of the Karamoja iron sheets. However, the Constitutional Court has since halted her trial in the lower court to enable her challenge what she calls inhumane treatment that was meted against her during her arrest.

In 2023, then DPP, Justice Jane Frances Abodo, declined to sanction files against several other top government officials, citing lack of sufficient evidence.

The judge went on to dismiss Nandutu's defence that she had been sidelined in the ministry and acted without full knowledge, describing the claims as unsubstantiated and contradicted by her own witnesses.

Justice Kajuga concluded that the prosecution had proved that the iron sheets were acquired as a result of an offence, namely the diversion of public property, and that Nandutu knowingly dealt with them.

"I accordingly convict her of the offence," she ruled, before cancelling her bail.

The conviction, according to the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP), sends a broader message on accountability in public office.

"This conviction sends a strong and necessary message that no individual, regardless of status or public office, is above the law," said Ms Jacquelyn C, the DPP spokesperson, said.