Reckless driving in Uganda: A national crisis on the roads

Dear Tingasiga:

I have been driving on Uganda's roads for a month. This silly-sounding report is a big deal for me, for I had abandoned all hope of ever gathering the courage to drive in this country again. No, I do not suffer from vehophobia (pathological fear of driving) or amaxophobia (fear of driving or of being a passenger in a motor vehicle.) My aversion to steering a car in Uganda had been triggered by the evident madness that seemed to be a requirement for successful navigation through the anarchy that has become the norm on our roads.

My decision to try my skills on Ugandan roads again has been rewarded with priceless re-affirmation that one cannot overstate the danger that Uganda's roads present to motorists, cyclists and pedestrians. There are over 20,000 reported road accidents in Uganda each year, with more than 5,000 fatalities. Many more suffer life-changing injuries, including body paralysis, and premature mental functional decline.

Reckless driving is the central cause of this preventable epidemic. Speeding remains perhaps the most prevalent and deadly practice. On both highways and urban roads, drivers routinely exceed posted speed limits, seemingly oblivious to basic laws of physics that taught us about reduced reaction time and increased impact force that higher speeds create. The reputation of the Kampala-Masaka-Mburara-Kabaare road, the Kampala-Gulu highway, and other major thoroughfares as death traps is justified. Numerous examples of vehicles barrelling along at breakneck speeds despite poor road conditions and heavy traffic leave one wondering why we do not have accidents in multiples of the reported figures.

Overtaking on dangerous road sections represents another common form of recklessness, often meeting oncoming traffic with catastrophic results. The competitive mentality among commercial drivers, particularly taxi and bus operators, exacerbates this problem as they race to pick up passengers and complete more trips.

In some sections of the highways, such as the Bukinda-Kyobugombe area in Kigyezi, where one side of the road has a patchy but very usable surface, oncoming motorists drive on the wrong side, forcing oncoming drivers to quickly move to the edge, risking tipping over into the ditch.

Driving under the influence of alcohol and other substances compounds the danger. Despite strict laws against drunk driving, enforcement remains inconsistent. The use of handheld mobile phones while driving is an additional hazard. Many boda boda riders hold the phone against their ear with one hand. Others use their shoulder to press the phone against the ear, which forces a tilted head, and altered visual focus on the road and other traffic. I have seen distracted drivers texting, calling, or browsing social media, which diverts their attention from the road, failing to notice pedestrians, traffic signals, or changing road conditions until it's too late.

Reckless driving is a worldwide phenomenon. However, Uganda may have an over-subscription to this highway madness. I wonder why? Several interconnected factors appear to contribute to Uganda's reckless driving epidemic. Poor driver training and inadequate licensing procedures may allow unqualified individuals to obtain driving permits. I know an individual who got a driving licence without being tested or even appearing at the issuing office in person. Yes, in very recent years. What is the quality of the country's driving schools? Who regulates their standards and training procedures? Do they prioritise profit over proper instruction?

Weak law enforcement plays a significant role. While traffic laws exist on paper, their implementation remains sporadic and inconsistent. I have not encountered evidence of speed detection radar during the last month. Are these tools still in use? Are police roadblocks exclusively focused on checking for contraband and undesirable people, with no interest in reckless drivers? When road safety violations go unpunished or can be resolved through corruption, the deterrent effect of the law evaporates.

Is there hope of effectively addressing this madness and its deadly consequences?



Muniini K. Mulera
Letter to a Kampala Friend

There is an old cultural attitude toward driving that appears to afflict many Ugandan drivers or their bosses in large doses. Some drivers view aggressive driving as a demonstration of skill or masculinity rather than dangerous behaviour. Some bosses, especially high-ranking politicians and others in the ruling group, consider their presence on the roads to be a matter of national importance. Their drivers flash multi-coloured lights and demand space to cruise to their destinations. They push other mortals off the road, for their need to reach their destinations is presumably more urgent than that of other road users.

The pressure on commercial drivers to maximise profits by completing more trips encourages speeding and reckless overtaking. Passengers, too, sometimes push drivers to go faster, creating a culture that rewards rather than condemns dangerous driving.

Infrastructure deficiencies are major contributors to the madness. Many Ugandan roads suffer from poor maintenance, inadequate lighting, missing or unclear signage, and hazardous conditions including multiple potholes and erosion. The absence of road-edge reflectors, and barely visible road division lines make nigh-time driving very dangerous. This is compounded by the tradition of oncoming vehicles keeping high beam headlights on, oblivious to the impact on other road users. While these infrastructure problems don't excuse reckless driving, they create an environment where such behaviour becomes even more deadly. Is there hope of effectively addressing this madness and its deadly consequences? An integrated approach that begins with educating primary and secondary school children about road safety and etiquette would be a good start. Public awareness campaigns can help shift cultural attitudes. Church sermons should regularly include a conversation about the sinfulness of reckless driving. Strengthening driver education and licensing must be a priority. Driving schools need rigorous oversight and standardisation, ensuring all instructors meet professional standards and provide thorough training. The licensing process should become more stringent and corruption-free, with practical tests that genuinely assess competence.

Law enforcement must be reformed, equipped and motivated to administer laws consistently and fairly. Penalties for road use violations should be meaningful enough to deter future offences, with escalating consequences for repeat offenders. Loss of one's licence and motor vehicle might persuade the reckless driver to reconsider their behaviour.

Uganda's reckless driving crisis is not insurmountable, but it demands urgent, sustained action from everyone who cares about human lives. However, I believe that the government should adopt a zero-tolerance approach to the problem. Wayward adults generally respond to severe measures, not to nice homilies about proper behaviour.

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