BOSS TALK

Airlines are built by experience, not excitement

INTERVIEW
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Uganda Airlines was revived with the promise of restoring national pride, improving connectivity, and stimulating economic growth. Yet, years into operations, the airline continues to grapple with persistent losses, weak governance structures, and extensive government interference in what should be commercial decisions.

Rather than operating as a disciplined, profit-oriented enterprise, the airline has often been treated as a public utility, expected to serve political, regional, and symbolic interests at the expense of sound business logic.

The result has been questionable route choices, costly capital decisions, and constrained management autonomy.

Aviation expert and retired pilot Capt Francis Babu says in this extensive interview that the "airline must first be run as a business, not as a training institution or a political project."

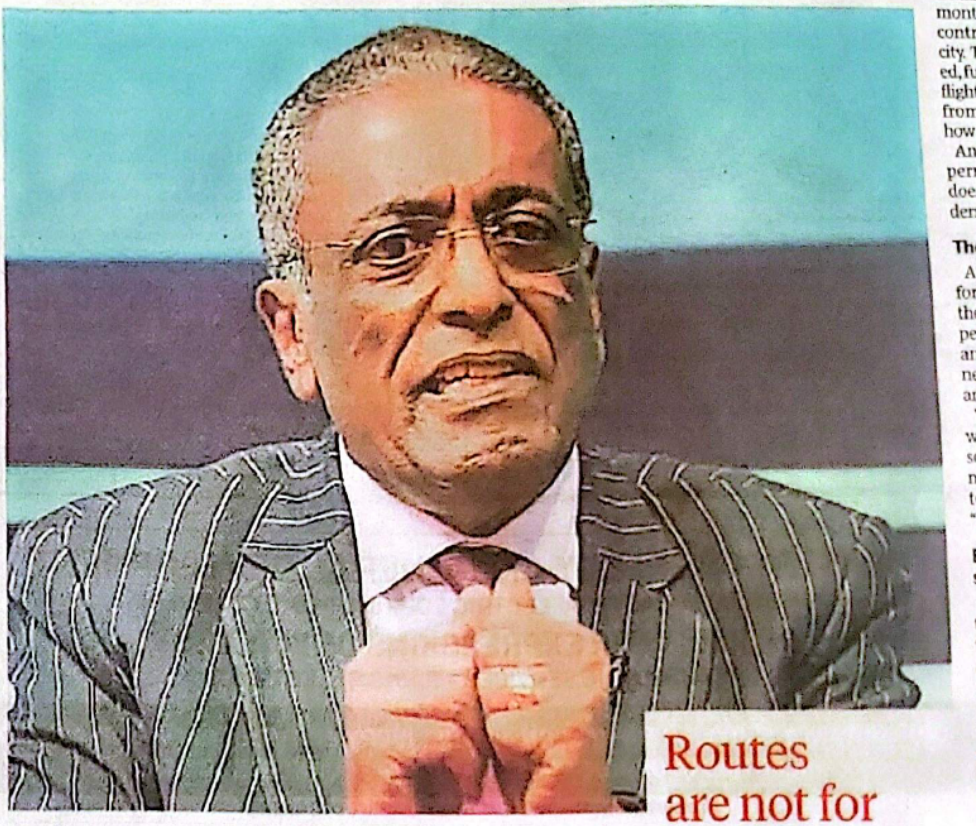
In his view, profitability, experienced leadership, and operational discipline must come before ambitions of job creation, national symbolism, or large-scale manpower development. Without this foundation, losses are inevitable.

At the core of Uganda Airlines' challenges is a failure to apply this principle. Aircraft, he says, were purchased outright at enormous cost instead of being leased; routes were launched without sufficient demand analysis; and key commercial and managerial roles were filled without deep airline-specific experience.

Governance structures blurred the boundary between ownership and management, weakening accountability while enabling interference in day-to-day operations.

The experience of successful airlines, particularly in comparable African contexts, he says, shows that sustainability depends on strong governance, experienced leadership, and commercial realism, not theory or symbolism.

The discussion that follows reframes Uganda Airlines' predicament through this lens, arguing that without a decisive shift toward experience-led management and reduced political intrusion, losses will persist and long-term viability will remain in doubt.



Capt Babu says routes are not for prestige or politics, noting that an airline flies routes to make money, if a route cannot pay, it should not exist." PHOTO/FILE

Routes are not for prestige

'Nairobi and Dubai make sense for Uganda because of business demand. Lagos does not. You don't start routes for prestige. You start routes to make money.'

Think of Uganda Airlines purely as a business, something meant to make money

Talk of employment numbers, capital structures, and similar issues is mostly noise at the startup. Those things come later, once the business is running and you know you can manage them. For example, how do you buy an airplane in cash before you have even started operating?

That doesn't make sense. These are theoretical questions, things taught in classrooms, but real business doesn't work that way.

Running an airline in Uganda is very different from running one in London. Our cultural context, discipline, and operating environment are different. Models that work in Europe cannot be copied wholesale here.

Leadership is critical. You don't train people first; you start the business first. That means you need a managing director with a proven track record, someone who has already done this before.

The individual (Girma Wake: We have not confirmed if he has been given any role) brought in is a very capable person; he helped Rwanda and worked in Ethiopian Airlines, where he contributed significantly. What he needs is a small team, three or four people of his caliber, to help revamp the airline. Training comes later, after operations are stable.

Focus on routes

You ask: What are our strongest, most profitable routes? For Uganda, the most reliable route is Entebbe–Nairobi. Routes like Mombasa, Dar es Salaam, or Kigali are not as strong.

The strategy is simple: take passengers from Entebbe to Nairobi, then connect them onward using other airlines. Someone traveling to Switzerland connects in Nairobi; someone going to London flies British Airways; to Rome with Alitalia; to India with Air India.

Your job is to secure interline agreements. You don't need staff who are still asking, "what is an interline agreement?" You need people who already know. You start operating first, learning comes later.

Nairobi and Dubai make sense for Uganda because of business demand. Lagos does not. Ethiopian Airlines and Kenya Airways fly to Lagos because they use their hubs, Addis Ababa and Nairobi, to connect passengers onward to Dubai, Saudi Arabia, China, and the Far East. Uganda does not yet have that hub power, so copying those routes makes no sense.

You don't start routes for prestige. You start routes to make money. If government wants you to fly unprofitable routes, then government must subsidise them, as happens elsewhere. British Airways, for example, is sometimes paid by the UK government to operate routes that are strategically important but not profitable.

On capital and aircraft

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