

Cargo vessels warned against ferrying people

Officials have warned cargo vessels against transporting passengers citing several illegalities.

BY KARIM MUYOBO

The Directorate of Citizenship and Immigration Control has issued a stern warning to cargo ship operators and boat owners operating on Lake Victoria against illegally transporting passengers across international waters, saying the vessels are licensed strictly for cargo and crew.

Officials under the Ministry of Internal Affairs say the practice is increasingly being used to bypass formal immigration procedures, raising concerns over transnational crime, human trafficking and passenger safety on East Africa's largest inland water body.

The warning follows intelligence reports from communities at Rippon Landing Site in Jinja City, where Immigration officers allegedly thwarted attempt by foreigners to travel illegally to Tanzania aboard a cargo vessel.

Ms Fatuma Nankya, an Immigration officer, said the planned journey violated both immigration and maritime safety regulations.

"Cargo ships are only licensed and authorised to carry goods and crew members, not passengers," she warned.

She explained that possession of a valid passport alone does not permit travellers to cross borders outside designated immigration points.

Rising security concerns

Immigration authorities say the misuse of cargo vessels exposes travellers to significant risks, including lack of proper accommodation, life-saving equipment, food supplies and emergency response mechanisms onboard.

Officials also link the practice to growing theft cases, attacks on fishermen and traders, and undocumented cross-border movement across the lake shared by Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania.

Assistant Commissioner for Citizenship and Immigration Control Marcelino Bwesigye said Uganda's migration management follows internationally



Residents look on during the launch of BKK ferry in Kamuli last month. Officials say it is illegal to carry passengers on cargo ferries. PHOTO/ SAM CALEB OPIO

recognised procedures requiring travellers to pass through gazetted entry and exit points.

Therefore, travellers must report to immigration offices upon entry to receive permits indicating the purpose and duration of their stay.

"When returning, immigration verifies where and when you entered. If you overstayed, the law provides for penalties," Mr Bwesigye said.

He warned that individuals who enter Uganda illegally risk arrest and prosecution because immigration officers cannot clear undocumented persons for departure.

Porous lake borders

Lake Victoria supports millions of livelihoods across East Africa but its vast size, numerous islands and informal landing sites make enforcement challenging.

Officials estimate that more than four million Ugandans depend directly or indirectly on the lake through fishing, trade, transport and related activities, while the wider regional fisheries sector provides over one million direct jobs.

However, the same conditions have

STERN WARNING

Immigration authorities have warned against cargo vessels' misuse. One of the incidents was an attempt by foreigners to travel illegally to Tanzania aboard a cargo vessel from Jinja City.

made the lake vulnerable to undocumented migration and organised crime.

Mr Alfred Kataruhwa, an immigration officer at Kasensero landing site, said authorities have recorded cases of boat and engine theft, illegal fishing and suspected human trafficking linked to cross-border movements.

"Criminals, sometimes commit offences on one side of the lake and escape to another country. Lack of proper documentation makes investigations difficult," he said.

He added that some fishing business operators employ undocumented foreign labourers often sourced from refugee settlements such as Nakivale.

"While refugees are allowed freedom

of movement, some employers exploit their vulnerability, which contributes to trafficking in persons and migrant smuggling," Mr Kataruhwa noted.

Strengthening border security

To address emerging security threats, the government, with support from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and other partners, has introduced measures to strengthen migration control on Lake Victoria.

These include installation of containerised immigration offices at major landing sites such as Port Bell, Jinja and Kasensero, deployment of the Migration Information and Data Analysis System (MIDAS), and specialised training for officers in document verification and detection of trafficking cases.

Project coordinator, Mr Richard Kavuma said the initiative aims to improve monitoring and coordination among border agencies and curb organised crime.

He added that building officers' capacity to identify victims of trafficking is expected to significantly reduce cross-border crimes on the lake.

Failure to comply will lead to various penalties.