

BY JOHN ODYEK

Uganda is stepping up investment in inland water transport, emphasising on safety, connectivity and infrastructure across its lakes and rivers. From new search-and-rescue centres to plans for a modern port at Bukasa, Wakiso district, government agencies are working to turn water transport into a reliable option for passengers, cargo and tourism.

With many water bodies spread across the country, officials say Uganda holds untapped capacity for a transport system that is affordable, energy efficient and environmentally friendly. The focus is on strengthening services on major water bodies, such as lakes Victoria, Kyoga, Albert, Edward, Bunyonyi and George, as well as the Kazinga Channel and River Nile.

Barnabas Twinomujuni, a senior licensing officer in the maritime administration department of the Ministry of Works and Transport, says many of Uganda's water bodies are navigable and can support both transport and tourism.

"These water bodies are located in different parts of the country and provide opportunities for the movement of people and goods. The Government has connected many crossing points with ferries to serve communities, and most of these services are subsidised," he says.

FERRY TRANSPORT
Ferry transport has become a lifeline

UGANDA CHARTS NEW COURSE

for communities separated by water, particularly in areas where road access remains limited. The Government operates 12 ferries, with an additional vessel serving Kalangala district. Under a public-private partnership with Kalangala Infrastructure Services, two more vessels operate on Lake Victoria.

Beyond ferries, private boats continue to dominate movement on water. These range from small wooden vessels used by fishing communities to larger watercraft, supporting tourism and trade.

Twinomujuni says all vessels are subject to inspection, registration and licensing to ensure compliance with safety standards.

The regulatory framework guiding this process is the Inland Water Transport Act, 2021. Before its enactment, the sector relied on outdated laws that could not address emerging challenges.

Fred Barasa Nderema, the acting assistant commissioner for ports, ship and maritime security, says earlier legislation dated back to 1939 and was no longer suited to the current scale of activity on the lakes.

"The number of vessels has grown over time, yet regulation remained limited. The establishment of the maritime



A search-and-rescue centre at Kaazi on Lake Victoria. The Government is looking to improve infrastructure at such sites

administration department in 2017 created a structure to manage safety, licensing and environmental protection," he says. One of the department's mandates is

to ensure safe navigation. This includes updating navigation charts that guide vessel movement. Surveys of Lake Victoria, for instance, date back to the early 1900s,

FOR WATER TRANSPORT

and require updating to reflect current conditions.

"Without proper charts, vessels risk running aground or colliding with obstacles. We are working towards updated surveys and mapping of routes used by vessels," Nderema says.

Safety has taken centre stage in recent reforms, following years of fatal accidents on lakes. Under a project funded by the African Development Bank, the Government has established nine search and rescue centres across major water bodies.

These centres act as emergency response hubs, equipped with rescue boats, firefighting vessels and ambulance boats. The system is designed to respond quickly to distress calls, whether involving capsized boats, fires or medical emergencies on water.

In case of an incident, these centres coordinate rescue efforts and provide first response services. Ambulance boats are used to evacuate victims and offer immediate care.

The initial rollout has focused on lakes Victoria, Kyoga and Albert.

Alongside emergency response, the Government has distributed life jackets to

communities to improve safety. Officials acknowledge that supply is not yet sufficient and warn against substandard equipment sold on the market.

Public awareness campaigns are being carried out to educate boat operators and passengers on safety practices, including the importance of wearing life jackets and avoiding overloading vessels.

Despite these efforts, enforcement remains a challenge. The vast distribution of water bodies makes it difficult to monitor all operators, particularly in remote areas. Twinomujuni says the department faces staffing and funding constraints, limiting its reach.

"To license a boat, it must first be inspected. This requires

officers to travel to landing sites, which are spread out; we need more resources to bring services closer to the people," he says.

Plans are underway to decentralise licensing services so that operators do not have to travel long distances to Kampala.

Digitalisation is another priority. Authorities are conducting a feasibility study on computerising vessel registration and licensing systems. The proposed system would create a central database, enabling real-time tracking of vessels operating on Uganda's waters.

Infrastructure development is a key pillar of the maritime strategy. The Government is working to upgrade infrastructure at landing sites, making them safer and more efficient for passengers and cargo handling. New sites are planned in underserved areas to expand access.

At the centre of long-term plans is the construction of Bukasa Port on Lake Victoria. Once completed, it is expected to become Uganda's main inland port, handling cargo traffic linked to regional trade routes.

Nderema says Bukasa Port will complement existing facilities such as Port Bell, which will remain in use but undergo improvements.

"Bukasa is planned as the main hub for international vessels; it will handle cargo moving between Uganda and ports such as Kisumu and Mwanza," he added.



Twinomujuni

REGIONAL TRADE

Water transport plays a role in regional trade, particularly through rail wagon ferries operating on Lake Victoria. Vessels such as MV Pamba and MV Kaawa carry cargo between Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania, linking to ports in Mombasa and Dar es Salaam.

Fuel transport has emerged as a new area of growth. A private investor, Mahathi Infra Uganda Limited, has introduced tankers capable of carrying up to 4.4 million litres of fuel per trip. These vessels connect to a pipeline in Kisumu and transport fuel across the lake.

Fred Barasa Nderema, the acting assistant commissioner for ports, ship and maritime security, says one such vessel can replace up to 150 fuel trucks on the road, easing congestion and reducing pressure on road infrastructure.

The expansion of water transport aligns with efforts to improve connectivity between remote areas and urban centres. Officials envision a system where travellers can combine air and water transport, such as flying into Entebbe and continuing by boat to destinations across Lake Victoria.

Encouraging private investment is part of this approach. The Government is focusing on providing core infrastructure, while private operators are expected to expand services in passenger and cargo transport.

Over the past five years, more than 2,100 private vessels have been registered, with an average of 420 licensed each year.