Fuel crisis: The truth behind empty pumps

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The triple evils of fuel stock-outs, soaring prices and long queues barrelled through the country yesterday, resurrecting memories of scarcities where Ugandans in the past lined up for essential commodities.

From Karamoja to Kigezi, and from West Nile to eastern Uganda, as well as the capital Kampala, motorists crowded fuel stations where they paid between Shs200-Shs1,000 more per litre. In other cities and districts, they were simply turned away after long waits.

The desperations flew in the face of earlier government assurances, repeated this week, of stable fuel volumes in-country and in transit on the seas.

The Energy ministry in an April 20 statement noted that national petrol, diesel and jet fuel stocks are sufficient to last for the next 20 days, or longer, and reported shocks relate to local logistical and market dynamics.

The regulator reported engaging oil marketing companies, and secondary agents, but said nothing on why it was not cracking the whip on dealers despite confirming that current pump price hikes were "unjustified".

The stock-outs and soaring pump prices set the stage for possible increases in transport fares and costs of foodstuff and other household items, according to economists.

Such inflationary pressures eat away more of the disposal income, but the Finance ministry yesterday gave assurances that there was no risk of overall economic damage.

Global fuel supply remains limited because of the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, a critical shipping route, stemming from the ongoing US-Israeli war with Iran that has raged on since February 28.

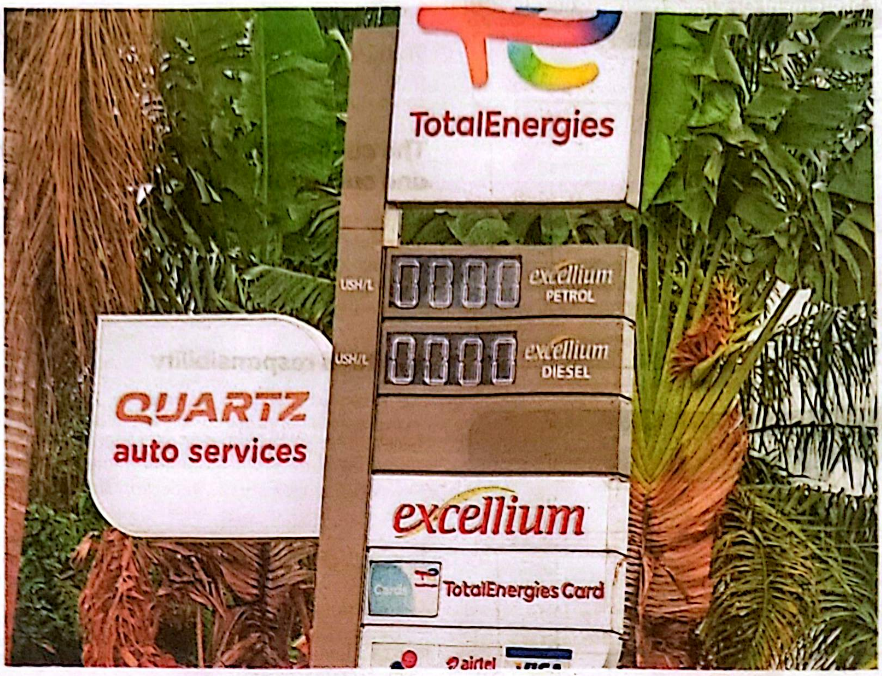
As of yesterday, it remained unclear whether our domestic dealers were facing genuine supply disruptions due to the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, where most of Uganda's fuel is sourced or were deliberately hoarding to force a shortage and profit from the pump price hike.

With Uganda's national fuel stock able to last only two weeks in a crisis, the situation is increasingly becoming precarious.

Mr Robert Mutebi, the secretary general of the United Bus Owners Association, said for the past two weeks there has been intermittent supply while at the same time the pump prices have been steadily inching upwards.

"For the past two weeks, we have experienced intermittent fuel shortages. Additionally, since Monday this week, we have observed a sharp increase in pump prices, with costs rising by Shs200-Shs500. While operational costs are rising, we are hesitant to immediately hike bus fares, recognising that our passengers are also facing financial constraints." Mr Mutebi said during an interview yesterday.

He added: "We are currently studying the situation and will meet this Friday to discuss the implications of these fuel shortages and price increases."



A blank fuel price board at Total Energies City Centre yesterday, April 23, 2026 as the station had no fuel. Fuel supply has been intermittently low for the past two weeks, leading to a rise in pump prices. PHOTO/MICHAEL KAKUMIRIZI

Variation in pump prices

A mini-survey in and around Kampala by this newspaper yesterday revealed motorists encountered a pump price hike of up to Shs459 per litre for petrol and Shs200 for diesel, with a spot check of 30 fuel stations showing the lowest for petrol at Luqman at Shs5,140 and the highest at Mogas Banda at Shs5,599.

Similarly, pump prices of diesel ranged from Shs5,300 at City Oil Kyambogo to Shs5,500 at Dawson, Texol, and Luqman. For a 50-litre refill, that means a difference of Shs22,950 on petrol between the cheapest and most expensive outlets surveyed.

Industry players said the gaps reflect how fuel moves through the supply chain. A dealer who preferred not to be named, told this newspaper that "small operators are now depending on the big suppliers and get the product at higher prices, incorporate into their pump prices and passing on the burden to the motorists".

But the strain is not just on price but also availability. Several of the stations surveyed on the Masaka Road stretches in Ndeeba, Kabuusu, and Nateete are struggling, with some operating on one product while others are waiting with their empty tanks.

Until the fuel supply evens out and live pump-price data is published, drivers will need to compare boards - because on Tuesday, the gap between Luqman's Shs5,140 and Mogas Banda's Shs5,599 was 9 percent of a tank.

For taxis on the Ndeeba-Nateete route, even getting fuel was not guaranteed.

Govt calls for calm

Meanwhile, the Finance ministry has urged calm, stating the economy is not in a crisis, assuring that the Energy ministry and the Uganda National Oil Company (Unoc) are on top of the situation.

"You may want to speak to the Ministry of Energy and Unoc, but I can tell you the economy is not in any crisis and there is no need for speculation or an increase in pump prices for whatever reason," said the Deputy Secretary to the Treasury, Mr Patrick Ocailap, when contacted yesterday.

A joint Ministry of Energy and Unoc statement issued yesterday, read in part: "As of 20 April 2026, the country had 70.5 million litres of petrol — enough for 19 days of national cover — alongside 43.2 million litres of diesel for 12 days and 32 million litres of jet fuel for 53 days."

"Those volumes, the ministry noted, sit within operational thresholds and are already being backed by confirmed shipments en route to Mombasa and alternative ports in Tanzania," the statement noted.

The joint statement further said between May 1 and June 2026, Uganda expects to take in an additional 183 million litres of petrol, 258 million litres of diesel, and 23 million litres of jet fuel. The incoming cargoes will add roughly 49 more days of petrol cover, 74 days for diesel, and 37 days for jet fuel, reflecting what officials called "strong forward supply planning."

The ministry said isolated retail shortages are tied to "logistical operations affecting individual Oil Marketing Companies (OMCs)" rather than a national shortfall. Price spikes in border towns like Arua and Tororo, it added, have been driven largely by cross-border demand, and OMCs have been engaged where "unjustified increases" appeared. While global oil dynamics, exchange rates, and geopolitics can move pump prices, the government said it continues to monitor the market to keep prices "within manageable levels".

"The public is, therefore, advised to remain calm and avoid panic purchases because there is no cause for concern regarding fuel availability," the statement read. Unoc, working with licensed OMCs and regional partners, is coordinating logistics to ensure the incoming volumes are received and distributed nationwide. For clarification, the Energy ministry directed inquiries to Dr Patricia Litho, the assistant commissioner for communications and information management.

Mr Peter Ochieng, a regional fuel marketing expert who tracks East African import cycles, said the mismatch often comes down to distribution, not headline volumes.

"Vessels in Mombasa solve the country's stock question, but they don't solve the dealer's cash flow question. When small players buy from bigger ones at a premium because they can't finance full cargoes or KPC line capacity, you get dry forecourts even when the national

AVAILABLE STOCK LEVELS

Fuel	Qty	Days
PETROL	70.5ml	19
DIESEL	43.2ml	12
JET FUEL	32ml	53

BY APRIL 20, 2026

FUEL SHIPMENTS EXPECTED

Fuel	Qty	Days
PETROL	183ml	49
DIESEL	258ml	74
JET FUEL	23ml	37

FROM MAY 1, 2026