

Comment

QUOTE OF THE DAY

Uganda National Oil Company
"UNOC and its supply partner, Vitol, are keen to ensure an uninterrupted supply of petroleum products."

EDITORIAL

Uganda must seriously consider penal reforms

The news that people numbering north of 7,000 have been arrested in security swoops across the country since the start of this year should be met with mixed feelings. There was an air of inevitability about the outcome, following a recent crime wave that left many people resident in Uganda looking over their shoulders. And they had good reason to be fearful.

Conversely, though, the developments cement Uganda's notorious reputation as the bearer of one of the most overcrowded prison systems in Africa. Indeed, the country has gained notoriety for—as of 2025—operating at roughly 341.6 percent to 374 percent capacity. At least per the World Prison Brief's dataset. As of last November, Uganda had 79,186 prisoners under its belt. This put the country's prison population rate at approximately 150 per 100,000 of the national population. The remand population generously contributed to a deeply troubling sentence inflation, with statistics showing that remandees awaiting trial—as of last November—contributed 45.8 percent to the nearly 80,000-strong tally of prisoners (53.9 percent of whom have been convicted).

Evidently, remedial action is needed to address the overcrowded prisons that, it must be stressed, have come with mounting costs. Yet feet continue to be dragged. The destructive consequences of a sheer lack of alternatives to custody have been brought to bear on the country's penal programme. The tortuously slow delays in the trial process have not helped matters, with Uganda now consistently ranked in the top 10 African countries for the highest total prison population.

The undisputed fact that the official capacity of Uganda's prisons—estimated, as of December 2025, at 23,184—commands a capacity utilisation of 340.8 percent is a damning indictment. Alternatives like tags, curfews, and harm prevention orders have to, in our assessment, be considered. We believe that harsh sentencing does not always have to be the default position.

In no way are we intent on dismissing the fears of those who would rather not have criminals roaming the country. But, with the conditions in many jails appalling, it is a no-brainer that Uganda has to commit to some kind of penal reform programme. Since short sentences have got a bad rap for increasing reoffending rates, other non-custodial sanctions or programmes have to be seriously considered.

The reason for this is, we believe, simple: Not only do such sanctions rehabilitate offenders but also lower prison costs. The sanctions in question could range from fines, restitution, community service, and probation.

Non-violent offences should typically be considered for the aforementioned non-custodial sanctions or programmes. A first-time offender, who has stolen a chicken, should not add to the country's prison courts. The feeding budget alone was put at Shs115.119 billion during the 2024/2025 Financial Year, with Shs88.814 billion made available. Yet the remanded chicken thief is not just an extra mouth to feed, but also their uniform and bedding come at a princely sum. If the views of relevant state actors on crime and punishment do not change, the country will find itself in a more precarious position.

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The issue:

Penal reforms

Our view:

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