

National News

Nandutu appears to be the only senior government official facing the full force of the law in the saga.

BY PHILLIP WAFULA

The conviction of former State Minister for Karamoja Affairs Agnes Nandutu over the diversion of government iron sheets has reignited debate on selective prosecution and unequal accountability in Uganda's anti-corruption efforts.

Governance experts and anti-corruption activists are questioning why Nandutu appears to be the only senior government official facing the full force of the law in one of the country's most high-profile corruption scandals in recent years.

On Wednesday, the Anti-Corruption Court found Nandutu guilty of diverting thousands of metal roofing sheets that had been procured for vulnerable communities in the Karamoja Sub-region.

Her conviction, three years after she first appeared in court on April 19, 2023, makes her the first senior government official to be convicted in the scandal that implicated several high-ranking figures, including Vice President Jessica Alupo, Prime Minister Robinah Nabbanja, First Deputy Prime Minister Rebecca Kadaga, and Finance Minister Matia Kasaija.

The development has since sparked fresh questions over why other senior officials named in the scandal have either not been prosecuted or had their cases discontinued.

At the height of investigations, the Inspectorate of Government (IGG) said at least 22 ministers, 31 Members of Parliament and 13 Chief Administrative Officers had been asked to explain their roles in the disappearance of the iron sheets.

However, only a handful of cases — about three — were taken to court.

Former Karamoja Affairs minister Mary Goretti Kitutu was arrested in

Is Nandutu a sacrificial lamb in iron sheets saga?

April 2023 on charges of causing loss of public property and conspiracy to defraud the government. She was later granted bail, but proceedings in her case were halted after she petitioned the Constitutional Court, citing alleged violations of her rights during arrest and prosecution.

Former State Minister for Finance Amos Lugolobi was also arraigned before the Anti-Corruption Court in June 2023 on charges related to dealing with suspect property after allegedly diverting iron sheets, some of which were reportedly used at his upcountry home in Kayunga.

However, the Director of Public Prosecutions later withdrew the charges against him, effectively leaving Nandutu as the only senior political figure still facing active prosecution in the matter.

Concerns

The withdrawal of charges against some officials, coupled with the decision not to prosecute others, has fuelled criticism from governance analysts who say the handling of the case raises concerns about fairness and consistency.

Mr Marlon Agaba, the executive director of the Anti-Corruption Coalition Uganda, described Nandutu as a "sacrificial lamb" in a scandal that involved numerous senior political actors.

"There were around 22 high-ranking politicians implicated in this scandal, but only three were taken to court. The case against Lugolobi was dropped, which raises legitimate questions of selective prosecution," Mr Agaba said.

"Nandutu is a sacrificial lamb. Several people were implicated, and most of them even returned the iron sheets. Why not prosecute them as well?" he added.

Former Ethics and Integrity minister Miria Matembe also questioned the



Former State Minister for Karamoja Affairs Agnes Nandutu at the Anti-Corruption Court on Wednesday where she was convicted of diverting 2,000 iron sheets meant for vulnerable communities in Karamoja. PHOTO/ ABUBAKER LUBOWA

consistency of accountability.

"I thought the iron sheets scandal case had been closed after several top government officials were let off the hook. Why convict some and leave others free?" Ms Matembe said.

She warned that the selective nature

of prosecutions risks distorting the historical record of the scandal.

"In the future, when people ask about the *mabaati* case, the answer will simply be that Nandutu was convicted," she said.

In its judgment, the Anti-Corruption

Justification. Accountability must be uniform to be credible, not negotiable. If some officials are prosecuted while others avoid the same legal scrutiny, it creates a perception problem," Timothy Chemonges, executive director of the Centre for Policy Analysis

Court held that Nandutu knowingly received and retained government property that had not been lawfully allocated to her and which she had reason to believe had been irregularly diverted from a public programme.

The court found that the iron sheets were part of a consignment of 10,000 pieces procured under the Karamoja Community Empowerment Programme to support vulnerable communities during the disarmament process.

Following the conviction, her bail was cancelled and she was remanded to Luzira Prison ahead of sentencing. She faces up to seven years in jail, a fine, or both.

Legal experts say the conviction is significant but caution that its impact on the broader fight against corruption will depend on whether accountability is applied uniformly.

Ms Jackie Asimwe, a lawyer and anti-corruption advocate, said isolated convictions are unlikely to deter graft if systemic weaknesses persist.

"The corrupt will not shake in their beds because of Nandutu's conviction," she said.

Policy analyst Godber Tumushabe said Nandutu may have been singled out, noting that several individuals admitted to receiving the iron sheets.

"I sympathise with Nandutu, but she took the iron sheets, she should be held accountable. However, I do not believe she is the only one culpable," he said.