Rome plane survivor narrates tragedy

By Jackie Nambogga and Charles Kakamwa

Twenty-nine years since the Uganda Airlines plane crash in Rome, Italy in 1988, memories are still vivid in the minds of those that lost their loved ones in the fatal incident.

But for Joshua Gutaka Nabende, one of the survivors, apart from the traumatising experience, injuries sustained and loss of property, he is haunted by the fact that he was pronounced dead and the mistake has never been corrected.

"The media on October 18, 1988 reported that I was among those who perished in the plane crash. I was number one on the list," he said in an interview at his home on Thursday.

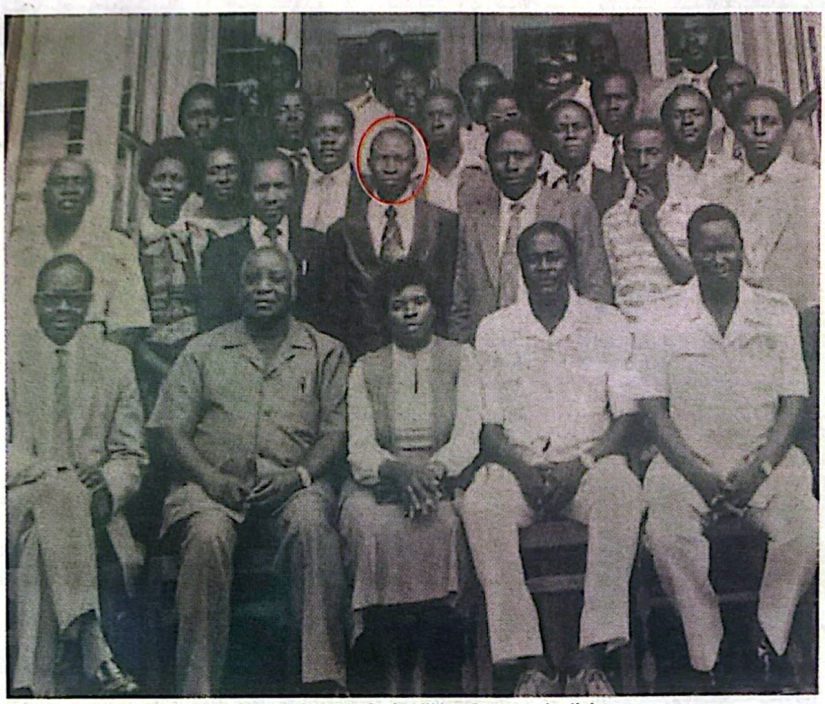
The Uganda Airlines Flight 775 crashed, while attempting to land at Roma-Fiumicino Airport in Rome, Italy on 17 October, 1988. Thirty-three of the 52 occupants on board were killed.

"To date, many of my friends and former workmates with whom I have lost contact believe I'm dead," he regretted.

In another incident, Nabende recently met a former bar attendant at Monte Crystal bar in Jinja town, where he used to hang out with peers back in the days.

Although the lady's face was still familiar to Nabende, she acted rather strangely and almost ran away. She later explained that she initially thought she had met his ghost since they were told he had died in the plane accident.

The former bar attendant reportedly confessed that she even attended a wake at Nabende's home, where a bonfire was lit by his family members to mourn his demise.



Nabende (circled) with workmates at Uganda Grain Milling Company in Jinja

The plane clash

After successful training, Nabende was eager and set to return home to put into practice the knowledge and skills he had acquired.

On the fateful day, by 4:00pm, he had checked in at the airport and completed the necessary formalities.

Their flight from London to Entebbe via Rome was meant to take off at 6:00pm, but it was later announced that they would be boarding the plane at midnight.

As they were due to take to the air, Nabende says, an air hostess asked them to fasten their seat belts. However, for his neighbour, a fat woman, who had lived in exile in Sweden since 1966, the seat belt could not fit her even when they improvised an extension.

The lady, who Nabende says was social, preferred the seat near the window. She began telling him about life in exile from 1966 to 1988.

Also, they talked of the ousting of Buganda king, Sir. Edward Mutesa, as they headed to Rome where the aircraft was scheduled to refill and pick more passengers bound for Uganda.

Then, the passengers were told to tighten their seatbelts, an indication that they were approaching Rome. The pilot, Captain Stephen Walusimbi, attempted to land, but failed reportedly due to technical problems.

Walusimbi, however, calmed those on board. At this point, Nabende says the plane began going up as the pilot prepared to try to land again.

Nabende recalls Walusimbi making and aborting a second attempt to land. However, during the third attempt, they began seeing unusual light while in the plane and shortly, he felt a jolt. The plane had crashed into a storeyed garage, with several vehicles in it.

"The pilot thought he was seeing lights on the runway of the airport, yet they were street lights," Nabende said.

At this time, Nabende was still locked into his seat by the seat belt, yet fire was spreading so fast. His neighbour died instantly. "I saw fire over the plane's wreckage," he narrates.

With his fingers severely burnt, Nabende says as he struggled to untie his seatbelt, which had jammed, while at the same time praying to God to save him.

When the belt unfastened, Nabende tried to stand only to realise he had sustained compound fractures on his legs and ribs and had blood all over his body. He could not breathe easily. He then rolled through the fire about 100 feet from the scene where the rescuers found him. His nice suit was no more; he was half naked.

He was rushed to St Camillo Intensive care Unit (ICU) in Rome where he acknowledges getting treatment for four weeks.

Nabende says, Essey Mukasa, his immediate boss at UGMC then, flew to Rome and it was then that news filtered in to relatives back home that he was still alive though in critical condition.

Meanwhile, at home in Jinja, believing that Nabende had died, relatives organised his last funeral rites and they shared his property, some belonging to his employers.

Arrangements were later made for Nabende's wife, Apophia, to travel and attend to him in the hospital in Rome.

"If I was in Uganda in that critical state, I would have died," Nabende says he was later transferred to UK for further treatment.

He says there were many Ugandan doctors based in the UK such as James Olobo who gave him support. He was also visited by Dr Ruhakana Rugunda, the then minister for transport, who availed some financial support. After his treatment, he returned to Uganda.

Nabende says he had pieces of metal inserted in the legs to aid his movement until 1992 when they were removed.

The Nabendes at their home in Buloba village, Buikwe district

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Battle for compensation

Nabende through his lawyer Michael Lwamusayi (RIP) of Lwamusayi and Company Advocates sued Uganda Airlines at the High Court in Kampala, seeking compensation for the damages and loss of property.

In the case handled by Justice John Wilson Tsekooko, Uganda Airlines was represented by Fred Ochieng Obbo, who was the company's manager for legal and government affairs.

Initially, the company reportedly tried to deny knowledge of the complainant, arguing that he had not been their passengers and that he was not one of the survivors of the plane crash. The airline only accepted he was their passanger after Nabende's lawyer produced his (Nabende's) air ticket and passport as proof.

The airline later paid him $5,000 as compensation, but he says most of the money was spent on his treatment. He showed *New Vision* copies of correspondences between his lawyer and that of the airline, mostly seeking compensation and financial support for treatment.

When *New Vision* asked Nabende whether he still had issues with the Uganda Airlines, he answered, "I'm done with the company after all it was disbanded."

Life after the plane crash

Nabende says the accident ruined his career.

"It completely destroyed my life, it happened at a time I was beginning to stabilise. As a result my children did not get the kind of education I would have wished for them," he said.

To date he still suffers complications he believes are a result of the plane crash. For instance, between 1988 and 1998, Nabende had difficulties while feeding. A doctor from Liberia, Dr Ato, managed to treat him.

"There was a time my neck became stiff, could not turn easily until 1996 when a doctor in Mbale found a remedy for it," he narrated.

In 2013, Nabende was diagnosed with cancer of the intestine which he says could have resulted from the burns he sustained. He enrolled for treatment at the Uganda Cancer Institute.

Much as he is thankful to the Government for the financial support while in Rome and London, Nabende says he needs financial support in order to undergo corrective surgery which requires more than sh10m.

Due to his poor health, Nabende retired in 1993 at the age of 43.

He has since been engaged in a number of business ventures for survival, including setting up AFYA Estates Limited in Mbale.

It was established on a three-acre piece of land, four miles on the Mbale-Soroti road using part of his savings and money from the compensation.

WHO IS NABENDE?

- Currently a resident of Buloba village, Wakisi division in Njeru municipality, Buikwe district, 66-year-old Nabende was an employee of the Uganda Grain Milling Company (UGMC). He was a manager in charge of NUVITA, a section of the firm dealing in the manufacture of poultry and animal feeds.
- During his tenure in the 1980s, UGMC through the government, secured a grant from Denmark meant to help the then Government-owned company automate its processes, with a view of cutting its operational costs.
- Nabende was selected to undergo an eight-month training course in the United Kingdom, ahead of the project implementation.
- In UK, Nabende was attached to Mole Valley Farmers, a co-operative company southeast of the UK, for six months. He also regularly visited individual farmers.

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