# Inside 12-hour-clearance wait at the Turkey border

The students were thoroughly checked by a team of six immigration officers, with each asked to open their suitcases and remove each item one by one.

BY BUSEIN SAMILU

A 300-person capacity Boeing 777-200LR operated by Ethiopian Airlines, carrying passengers, including 43 Ugandan students who were rescued from the ongoing Israel/US – Iran war, is expected to land at Entebbe International Airport at exactly 5:45pm today.

Details of the air ticket purchased by the government for these students from Xplore Travel Services show that the students will depart from Istanbul Airport, in Istanbul, Turkey, today at 7:35am, land at Bole Airport, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, from where they [illegible] off again at 3:45pm, and arrive at 5:45pm.

Their safe travel to Uganda will bring to an end the first rescue mission, which kicked off last Saturday, involving taking risks and untold suffering by the students.

A few hours after the Israel/US struck the Iranian capital Tehran, killing more than 200 people including Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the students of Ahlul Bayt International University took a bus ride from Iran City to the Iran-Turkey Border post of Gurbulak. This is where they were picked and taken to Istanbul, where they were kept until today morning when they departed.

In our edition yesterday, we showed you how the students braced a 950km journey full of explosions and uncertainty up to the border. They share what happened at the border and the [illegible]h journey to Istanbul.




Uganda's Defence Advisor in Turkey, Maj Gen Bob Ogiki (centre) in a photo with Ugandan students evacuated from Iran at the Movenpick Hotel in Istanbul, Turkey. PHOTO/COURTESY OF COL CHRIS MAGEZI X HANDLE

### At the border

After spending 19 hours on the road and changing from one bus to another through three major provinces of Iran, including Qazvin, Zanjan, and East Azerbaijan, the students, who arrived at the border at 12pm on Sunday, were made to wait at the Gurbulak border post for another 12 hours before they were cleared to enter.

Different students yesterday in a phone interview with *Daily Monitor*, shared more experiences they went through, especially at the border, where they were subjected to checks, some say they had never witnessed in their lives.

"We went through three checkpoints, but one after the other became hard...," one of the students who preferred not to be named shared.

On arrival at the border, the students told the *Daily Monitor* that the situation was generally calm because the war had not intensified in those parts so people were being cleared.

"We even first relaxed, entered a supermarket and bought snacks as we waited for the people who came before us to be cleared to enter ... .generally it was people with families from Iran entering," the student added.

No sooner had 30 students been cleared than the Internet broke down, which forced the authorities at the border to halt the process until it was restored.

"Thirteen of us and our other colleague from West Africa were left behind. We had to wait for three hours before the system was restored at around 7pm (Sunday) then they started working on us and we proceeded to the second checkpoint," another student shared.

**43 STUDENTS RETURNING**

Things started hardening at the second check point where a student from Benin was stopped from proceeding pending confirmation from his Embassy that he is indeed their national. Here, students say all their passports were collected and taken to Ankara for further check.

"The immigration officers asked us to be patient, and we waited until 11pm before the passports were returned and we proceeded to the last and hardest and strict checkpoint," the students shared.

At this particular checkpoint, the students were asked to open their suitcases and remove each item one by one, put them aside before the team of six immigration officers started checking one by one.

"After checking, we were asked to put the things back in bags and put them in the security machine for further checks. We were subjected to airport security checks, and we removed everything metallic, like belts, phones, among others, from our bodies, before passing through the security machine," the students shared.

"We were asked to look through the cameras, then the officer could look at you keenly and look at the passport to ensure that it is you before stamping for us the Transit visa for five days," they added.

They observed that the strict checks were largely directed at Africans, while other nationals, such as Iranians, appeared to receive more lenient treatment.

"After about 30 minutes, a big bus arrived and parked at the border to bring us here (Istanbul), where we are now. Two Ugandan nationals working at our Embassy in Ankara really helped us. They supported us at the border with everything, guiding us and even lifting our luggage to the bus because we were very tired," one female student shared.

**STRICT CHECKS**

**According to their observation, the strict checks were mainly done on Africans, but for their neighbours, such as Iranians, the treatment was fairer.**

**The government aslo bought for them meals (breakfast, lunch, supper, and dinner) and ensured the bus had multiple well-trained drivers.**

### Long but smooth journey to Istanbul

Unlike the long Tehran-Gurbulak journey that was full of uncertainties and safety questions, the distance from the border, despite being longer, students said, was smooth and full of peace.

Between the Tehran-Gurbulak border posts, the students made three stopovers, with two for freshening up and one for changing from one bus to another, but to Ankara, students say, in addition to the extra ones, they stopped seven times on the way.

The government bought us meals (breakfast, lunch, supper, and dinner) and ensured that they provided a bus that had multiple well-trained drivers who drove at a moderate speed.

"They even served snacks in the bus; we were given time to freshen up during the journey. It was a good one, and that's why I think it took us about 25 hours to complete that journey," a student shared.

Gurbulak border post is located in the easternmost part of Turkey, bordering Iran, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia in the east and Iraq in the south, and is 1,117km away from the Turkish capital of Istanbul. Via road, it takes travellers 18 hours and 49 minutes to reach.

In between the journey, four major cities of Erzurum, Erzincan, Bolu, and Izmit are packed with several small towns where travellers can make stops and rest before continuing the journey. The students said they had more than one driver who drove on intervals.

The Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF), through their spokesperson Col Chris Magezi, yesterday confirmed that the students will arrive in Uganda today at 5:45pm.

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