Join the campaign: 'Safe roads, save lives'

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Driving out of home to join the heroic Joe Walker (Government name Joseph Beyanga) as he set off on his 212km walk from Kampala to Hoima early Saturday morning was not as simple as I thought it would be.

A few hundred metres into my short journey to the Sheraton Kampala Hotel, I found myself fiddling with the light toggle in my car and then realising my lights rked just fine.

It was just too damn dark outside and there were no street lights or reflective markers to guide me. Instead, I faced many drivers coming my way with their lights switched on full blare to blind me further.

A few of those vehicles were clearly being operated by people who had spent most of Friday night propping up the alcohol industry. At least one of them connected with the newly-constructed road islands.

I could not blame them. Even I, in my sober state of mind, kept getting surprised by the islands and other aspects of the road.

I declared to the Joe Walker gathering that I had almost died at least 20 times going the 8km from my home to the Sheraton that morning.

And so I pledged five tins of reflective paint for application onto the road islands. Besides saving lives, that should save us money as a nation by stopping drivers, drunken or sober, from destroying public infrastructure. It was an appropriate entry into the event I was going for, and its import. Joe Walker's mission to Hoima is in flow with all the others he has conducted so far, 'Safe Roads, Save Lives'.

The Minister of Works and Transport, Gen.Katumba Wamala, conducted the official flag-off and even walked the first 4km of the trek.

"You are doing our job!" he declared, commending Joe Walker for his initiative.

He was quite right, and I am convinced that even as we demand that the Government does what it should do, where we can we should not stop making personal contributions.

A very short distance into the walk itself, we were astonished to find a motorist going in the wrong direction on the one-way Buganda Road. He was more astonished to note that the group facing him was being led by Gen. Katumba Wamala, all wearing reflective vests festooned with road safety messages.

"Honourable minister, may I please make a citizen's arrest?" Joe Walker asked and on getting the go-ahead he did so.

Guess what? The driver turned out to be a police officer. Sadly, there are many such unserious fellows in positions of authority at different levels, who also need to be urged to be serious.

Thankfully, there are also the likes of Gen. Katumba Wamala, who does not pull punches when they are needed. He welcomed the offer of paint as well as any other small contribution people like me had to offer.

We have to do this even if we pay taxes, because too many children are at risk.

On my way back from Kisozi Farm the evening after the walk had started, we encountered one specifically bad accident at the Kampala Flyover after Kibuye Clock Tower involving a woman and three children.

The children seemed physically unharmed but were distraught at their mother's situation, trapped by an air bag (thank God) and the front of the crushed-in vehicle.

From the appearance of the two vehicles involved, there was certainly careless driving and speeding to blame, both personal actions by Ugandans who should have known better.

The day before, Gen. Wamala had said to us, "Some people blame narrow roads for accidents, but that is not logical. The roads are already narrow, so it is you and I, the people using them, who have to adjust how we use them."

You would think that logic is easy to follow. Even considering that many places in European towns and cities also present such narrow roads without so many disturbing images and reports of road carnage.

Their narrow roads, meanwhile, are most likely the result of years of urban planning with heritage protections being held on to. Ours? Not so much.

In some places we have the exact opposite of personal contributions creating those narrow roads and putting young lives at risk every single morning.

Go to any place one link up from a main road, as I did in Namugongo early Wednesday morning, and see how the homes are planted so closely together that no two cars can safely criss-cross each other without exchanging body paint.

The victims, I was sad to note, are hundreds and thousands of pedestrian school children who struggle to stay alive just getting to school every morning and back home in the evening.

Some motorists were even hooting at school children and their minders to move closer to the perimeter walls on the roadside, so the vehicles could dodge potholes better.

Which reminded me of another statement Gen. Wamala made to me on Saturday, in response to my ordeal getting to the event: "The media reported one time that 14 million Ugandans have mental health problems. Many of those are road users, so never be surprised when you have such difficult experiences..."

I agreed.

The remaining 33 million Ugandans, though, need to be more serious about road safety and all its aspects.

We cannot continue having pedestrian toddlers competing with cars on narrow, potholed, unlit roads; we should not allow public infrastructure to be installed carelessly without all protections in place; we must demand accountability from all government institutions whose responsibility is public safety.

Most of all, we must, all of us, Be Serious about the way we walk, ride, and drive on the roads in Uganda because as Joe Walker says, 'Safe Roads Save Lives'.

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