

Okello: Most guarded prisoner of our time

BY ANTHONY WESAKA

KAMPALA. "Hmmm, this man (Okello) is guarded just like the President," a member of the public exclaimed about the heavy deployment around the Okello community trial at Ggaba Community Church playground.

Indeed, the comment by this member of the public was not exaggerated.

Okello's trial, which has been ongoing for three weeks, has transformed a quiet lakeside suburb into one of the most heavily secured zones in recent memory, underscoring the extraordinary public emotion and State vigilance surrounding the case.

At the makeshift High Court at Ggaba Community Church playground, security presence is not just visible, it is overwhelming.

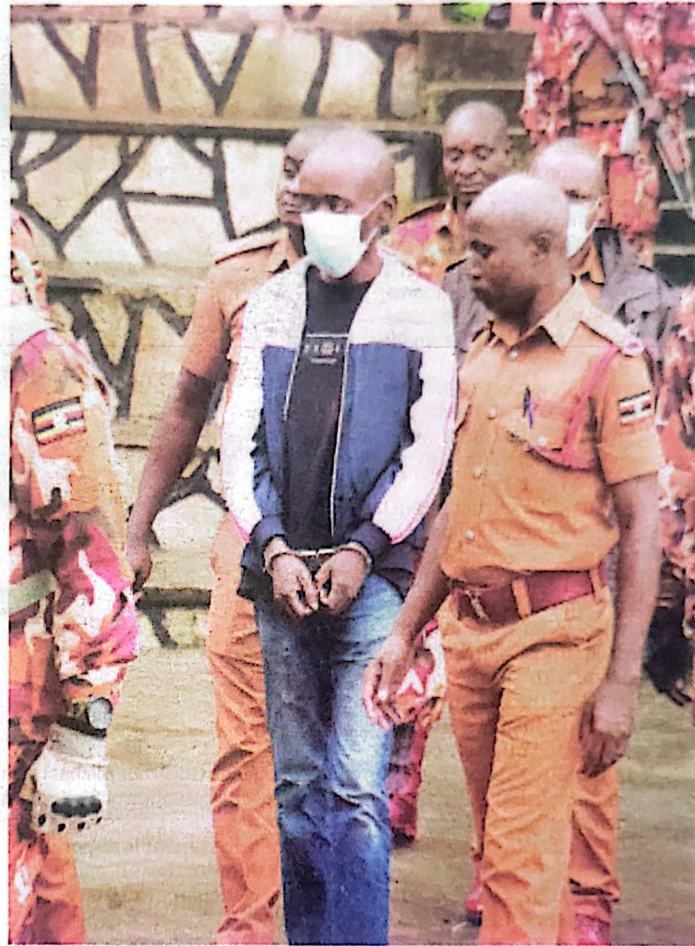
Armed personnel line access roads, man checkpoints, and blend into crowds, creating a layered security ring rarely seen in ordinary criminal proceedings.

Observers estimate that more than 100 security operatives are deployed on a typical trial day.

When this reporter did some counting of the security personnel at the lower section of the court venue, where proceedings take place, it was discovered that the area is guarded by at least 50 officers, while another roughly equal number secures the upper side, including nearby schools and the trading centre.

Within the inner cordon, about 13 prison warders form a tight human ring around Okello, several of them armed.

The deployment cuts across multiple agencies, including counter-terrorism units, regular police, the army, and military police, an inter-agency presence that signals the sensitivity authorities attach to the case.



Christopher Okello is brought to court on Monday. PHOTO/ABUBAKER LUBOWA

"This place is just like a barracks," remarked one resident of the trading centre, capturing the intensity of the security footprint that has defined their daily lives for the past three weeks running in their area.

Beyond uniformed officers, plain-clothed operatives are strategically

embedded among members of the public, while at least two checkpoints screen everyone accessing the venue.

Police spokesperson Rusoke Kituuma yesterday defended the extensive deployment, citing the unprecedented public interest and emotional weight of the case.

Justification.
It's a public interest matter that is highly attended. The incident aroused very significant public emotions, and so we couldn't take it lightly," **Rusoke Kituuma, police spokesperson**

"It's a public interest matter that is highly attended. The incident aroused very significant public emotions, and so we couldn't take it lightly," he said in an interview, declining to disclose the exact number of personnel involved on grounds of operational confidentiality.

The heightened security traces back to April 2, when Okello allegedly attacked Ggaba Early Childhood Development Programme, killing four preschool children by stabbing them with a kitchen knife. In the immediate aftermath, enraged residents attempted to lynch him, overwhelming police efforts despite warning live shots.

It took the intervention of military police to restore order and extract Okello alive.

That episode continues to shape the State's approach to handling the Ggaba locals.

The security is very much alive, and returning Okello to the same community now hosting his trial, carries a significant risk.

Public anger remains palpable, often spilling into open calls for mob action during proceedings.

"Just give him to us, and we'll finish him off," some residents have been heard shouting, remarks that illustrate the volatile atmosphere security agencies are working to contain.

The scale of deployment places the Okello trial among a select category of cases in Uganda that have, in the recent past, required exceptional security arrangements.