



n UCC defends social media blockade

BY IVAN OKUDA

editorial@ug.nationmedia.com

KAMPALA. Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) yesterday admitted it had received instructions from security agencies to disable access to social media sites and slow down internet but added it was, "in the interest of the wider public, their safety and property". Human rights lawyers and presidential contender Amama Mbabazi took exception to the excuse arguing the move was typical of dictatorships and denied citizens' access to information.

In a statement released yesterday UCC executive director Mr Godfrey Mutabazi quoted section 5(1)(b) and (x) of the UCC Act 2013, which he argued empowered the regulator to direct telecommunication companies and internet service providers to "curb further proliferation of harmful content on the internet and social media."

The statement comes after President Museveni, asked by journalists after he cast his ballot in Kiruhura District, justified the limitation of access to the internet, citing misuse of the same. "Upon advice of security agencies, UCC on February 17 directed operators to limit access to social media and mobile money platforms by reducing bandwidth for social media such as Facebook,

Twitter and WhatsApp as well as mobile money platforms in order to avert imminent attack by terrorist groups," Mr Mutabazi said without giving specifics of the claimed looming terrorist attack. Police has been accused widely by opposition politicians of using the threat of terror attacks to justify a clampdown on opposition activities and trample on fundamental rights and freedoms in the name of national security. UCC cited the example of France where some websites were blocked following the 2015 attack in Paris.

Human rights lawyer Ladislaus Rwakafuuzi said yesterday: "I don't buy that explanation because it comes against the background of an attempt at stopping people from going to polling stations with phones and some people seeking redress in court," adding, "Uganda has gone through phases of violence even before social media was abundant and in any case the average cost of a smart phone is Shs300,000 which few people have, so those who throw stones don't even use social media."

Speaking to *Sunday Monitor* in a brief interview hours after police deployed at his residence in Kololo, Mr Amama Mbabazi condemned UCC's actions, saying they denied citizens access to information but added, "that is how dictatorships behave."