Africa Catholic body urges govt to free Masaka priest

The body says the strength of a nation is shown by its capacity to listen, to dialogue, and to protect the dignity of all.

BY KARIM MUYOBO

A continental network of Catholic scholars, leaders, and advocates of pastoral ministry and church studies has asked the government to immediately release detained Masaka priest, the Rev Fr Deusdedit Ssekabira.

The pan-African Catholic Theology and Pastoral Network (PACTPAN) in a statement on Saturday also warned that the detention of Fr Ssekabira reflects a worrying trend of suppressing civil society, peaceful protesters, and members of the clergy.

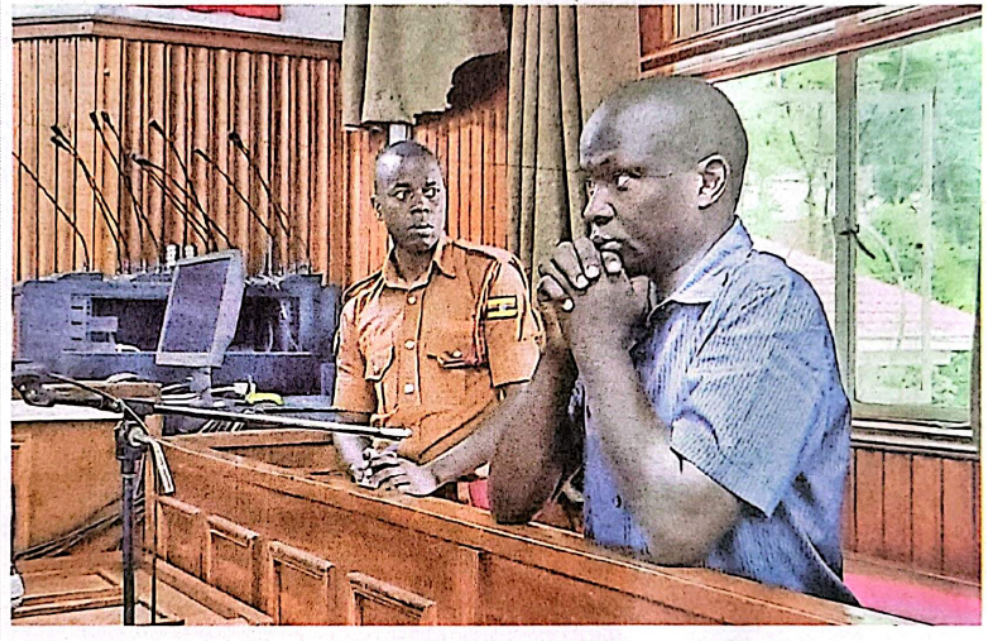
Today marks two months since the Catholic priest from Bumangi Catholic Parish in Masaka Diocese was abducted and held incommunicado for several weeks before being presented and charged in Masaka High Court.

But the continental Catholic network said the arrest and detention raises serious questions about the State's commitment to constitutional rights, freedom of expression, and protection of peaceful assembly.

"Freedom of expression and the right to peaceful protest are inalienable human rights. From our Christian conviction, they are also God-given gifts rooted in human dignity," the statement read.

"The strength of a nation is shown not by the silencing of its citizens, but by its capacity to listen, to dialogue, and to protect the dignity of all," they added.

The Catholic body called for the immediate release of all individuals detained in connection with peaceful civic action, an end to intimidation of clergy and activists, and the opening of a genuine national dialogue involving religious leaders, civil society, and political actors on the protection of civic space and democratic freedoms.



Rev Fr Deusdedit Ssekabira in the dock at Masaka High Court on January 28, 2026. PHOTO/FILE

Accusations

Fr Ssekabira, 47, was charged on December 14 in Masaka High Court, with the prosecution alleging that between 2023 and 2025, at Centenary Bank Masaka Branch in Masaka City, the priest and others still at large, concealed property internationally believed to be proceeds of crime.

Subsequently, President Museveni during a thanksgiving for his reelection, in Kiruhura District, said Fr Ssekabira was reportedly involved with opposition National Unity Platform (NUP) party leader Robert Kyagulanyi.

President Museveni said religious leaders had appealed for the priest's release, but he declined, and said the release would only be possible if those involved told the truth and stopped their activities.

"Some of the Opposition are wrong, but not terrorists. Some are wrong, but terrorists. The other day, when I had a meeting with the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda, I told them if they could find a way with these misled people so that we don't have to use a strong arm on them, it would be better," he said.

"...When I met (Masaka Catholic) Bishop Jjumba here a few days ago, we had arrested a priest in Masaka because he was involved with Kyagulanyi. They wanted me to release him, but I said no. We can't release him. We can release him if they tell the truth and stop, because our interest is not to punish but to stop and never do it again."

Accountability

But the pan-African Catholic network said: "On July 23, 2024, more than 45 Ugandans were arrested while peacefully demanding accountability from elected leaders. Similarly, on August 1, 2025, a group of 12 youth environmental and climate justice defenders was detained while advocating responsible governance. These incidents highlight a pattern of targeting peaceful voices rather than addressing their concerns."

The Catholic body has warned that the continued suppression of dissent risks deepening public mistrust in State institutions and undermining social cohesion.

"We remind the police and the military of their sworn duty to protect all Ugandans, regardless of political affiliation, opinion, or social position," the statement read.

The network also called on President Museveni to uphold his responsibility as the leader of all Ugandans, including critics and peaceful dissenters. It reminded the President of his 1986 pledge that democratic governance is a right, not a favour granted by those in power.

"What we witnessed today appears to be a painful departure from that promise," the network said.

"Protest is not a crime. Their struggle is part of a broader effort to secure a future grounded in justice, accountability, and hope," they added.

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