

Uproar over all-powerful Uganda Airlines new CEO

The appointment of Mr Girma Wake by the President as a consultant and acting CEO has created an uproar.

BY PHILIP WAFULA

President Museveni's appointment of Mr Girma Wake, the former Ethiopian Airlines chief executive, as a consultant and acting Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Uganda Airlines, has raised eyebrows on his roles.

A statement from State House on Monday evening indicated that Mr Wake had been appointed to plug management gaps at Uganda's struggling national carrier following the exit of Ms Jenifer Bamuturaki.

"Reference is made to the current leadership and management weaknesses in Uganda Airlines. I hereby direct that you go ahead and appoint Mr Girma Wake as a Consultant/Advisor to assist in rectifying a number of management weaknesses in the airline.

"In addition, he is to serve as Acting CEO until we appoint a new CEO by July 2026, as I had agreed with Ramadan." Mr Museveni wrote in a February 13, letter addressed to the Minister of Transport and Works, Gen Katumba Wamala, adding that Mr Wake will work hand-in-hand with the Board until a substantive CEO is appointed.

Mr Museveni added: "I also direct that the current CEO, Ms Jenifer Bamuturaki, be enabled to step aside immediately and hand over to Mr Girma Wake and the Board of Uganda Airlines. The Board should go ahead and organise whatever emoluments are due to her."

The directive came just days after Mr Museveni met Mr Wake at State House, Entebbe, on February 4, 2026.

Ms Bamuturaki's scandal-ridden tenure, coupled with the airline's continuous losses, was already living on borrowed time and was bound to end in July. She had been at the helm since July 2022.

Uganda Airlines, revived in 2019 after a 20-year hiatus, has struggled to shake off doubts about profitability, fleet utilisation, route viability, and governance structure, despite government backing.

Mr Wake's appointment, however, has raised eyebrows, leaving puzzling clues in the many hats he comes to the table with.

Governance commentators have debunked the idea of combining roles, acting CEO, external consultant/advisor, and board 'collaborator', all rolled into one, calling it a recipe for confusion.

Loopholes
The debate simmers around whether Mr Wake is being hired as a CEO while simultaneously contracted as an independent consultant.

Unanswered questions abound: How can Mr Wake be both consultant and acting CEO of the very entity he's consulting for? Will he be paid as consultant?



WHO IS WAKE?

Born in 1943 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Mr Girma Wake was among the first Ethiopians to rise through the executive ranks and joined Ethiopian Airlines in 1965, aged just 22 years. He later left the airlines after close to three decades, before returning in February 2004 as CEO to transform Ethiopian Airlines from a respected African carrier to the continent's benchmark. After stepping down as CEO in 2011, he assumed chairmanship of RwandAir from 2012 to 2017, later returned to the Board of Ethiopian Airlines in 2018, and became chairman in 2022, serving until June 2023.

Mr Girma Wake (left), the newly appointed CEO and consultant of the Uganda Airlines stands with President Museveni. PHOTO/FILE

dor Walusimbi asked this publication to speak to the Ministry of Works and Transport.

Gen Katumba Wamala was reported out of the country, but the Ministry spokesperson, Mr Allan Ssempebwa, said: "It is an official statement from the Presidency, and the directives are very clear. Nothing more, nothing less."

Governance researcher Job Kijja called the appointment a red flag.

"That's micromanagement, and a failure of governance on his part. Then, what is the role of the Board and even the minister? How can someone enrolled or engaged in that manner be held accountable by the Board?" Mr Kijja asked.

Mr Kijja argued that Mr Museveni is repeating mistakes made with Ms Bamuturaki, allegedly "bypassing the

Board," and warned that we cannot expect magic from Uganda Airlines. By his letter, Mr Kijja said Mr Museveni seems to be "helping" Ms Bamuturaki to "retire honourably and evade accountability."

"There are issues at Uganda Airlines that require her (Ms Bamuturaki) to be held accountable. If Mr Wake takes over and sees that his predecessor was simply helped to evade accountability, what incentive does he have to perform better in a more accountable manner when he knows that he can actually perform poorly, abuse airline resources and still be let off the hook?"

There seems to be no easy solution to the crisis plaguing the national carrier, with the CEO of Corporate Governance Institute of Uganda, Mr Dison Okumu, describing the current move to improve the situation as a crisis in itself.

Mr Godber Tumushabe of the Great Lakes Institute for Strategic Studies described the recruitment as "faulty" and "opaque," saying it fails to address governance issues that led to the crisis.

"There cannot be an effective remedy that does not relieve the current Board of its responsibility since it presided over the brokenness that characterised AU operations. Bamuturaki cannot be culpable, and the Board that is her supervisor is absolved of responsibility," he said.

Tumushabe said even the responsible minister should have taken political responsibility and resigned or be fired by the President.

"But ultimately, the President, who created the current situation, is the one pretending to solve it," he said.

Human Rights lawyer Nicholas Opiyo said Uganda reached this stage of mismanagement because of political interference.

He argues that these directives side-step systems, create confusion, and power centres that undermine the airline's effective management.

Opiyo believes the presidential advisors may have to save the President from these imperial tendencies and the knack to undermine established structures and systems.

"Wake's vast experience may be impressive, but he, more than anyone else, ought to know that such an improper hiring process is a slippery slope. Hiring a CEO without dismantling the system and culture that led to the airline's poor performance will not help much," Mr Opiyo said.

Human Rights lawyer Andrew Karamagi said the "original sin," as with other parastatals, was the alleged dubious privatisation and subsequent collapse of the airline.

He said: "Anyone who has, even casually, observed the fate of our national carrier cannot miss the overbearing, destabilising, undue influence and interference that Mr Museveni has exerted on its daily operations. No success will be registered until such actions are stopped."

Mr Karamagi said rules, regulations, and institutions cannot succeed where a country is being run as a family business.

In a November 2018 interview with this publication, Mr Wake advised the Ugandan government not to meddle in the daily operations of Uganda Airlines if the national carrier is to succeed. At the time, he said the new management team required relevant manpower, adequate resourcing and proper regulation and operational framework.

KEY PROBLEMS AT UGANDA AIRLINES

Leadership instability

- Frequent suspensions and sackings of top management and board members.
- Accusations of incompetence and lack of required qualifications for senior roles.

Governance and corruption issues

- Reports of nepotism, favouritism, and employing relatives.
- Inflated procurement costs and irregular contracts (e.g., fuel, uniforms, publicity).
- Collusion between board members and managers to manipulate invoices and profit from procurement.

Financial mismanagement

- Losses of Shs164.5 billion

between FY2019/2020 and FY2020/2021.

- Airline collected only Shs48.6 billion out of a budgeted Shs304.6 billion.
- Payments made to service providers without following due process.
- Over Shs500 billion lost in three years with no recovery in sight.

Procurement irregularities

- 25 procurements outside the approved plan in FY2020/2021.
- Fuel supply deals through middlemen, leading to inflated costs.
- Questionable contracts with PR agencies and bloggers costing taxpayers millions.

Operational inefficiencies

- Poor record-keeping in engineering and stores, leading to asset accountability problems.
- Ticketing irregularities: over 900 tickets worth Shs982 million not reflected in revenue.
- Reliance on external agencies selling tickets at inflated prices.

Scandals and probes

- COSASE and PAC investigations exposed mismanagement, incompetence, and irregular contracts.
- CID and State House Anti-Corruption Unit launched fresh probes into alleged embezzlement, abuse of office, and false accounting.
- Continuous flight delays and cancellations, frustrating customers.