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EXPANSION CRAZE

President Ruto of Kenya has announced plans to build a new airport, a move that experts warn could be counterproductive given the current struggles of Kenya Airways. This announcement follows the cancellation of a deal awarded to Adani Group for the expansion of JKIA, which generated controversy. East African countries are investing heavily in airport upgrades in the hope of becoming the region's aviation hub. Uganda is expanding Entebbe International Airport and constructing Kabalega International Airport in Hoima at the cost of \$1 billion, financed largely through external debt.

Why Kenyan tea exporters have opted for air transport

ANTHONY KITIMO
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Kenyan tea exporters are paying up to eight times more to airlift consignments to the United Kingdom, as crippling delays at Mombasa port leave them scrambling to protect contracts and safeguard the country's reputation in the global trade.

Tea Buyers Association chairman Peter Kimanga said exporters had no choice but to use air freight to avoid being labelled 'unreliable suppliers' in the UK market.

"Currently, we are paying \$2 per kilo to transport tea to the UK compared to \$0.25 when shipping by sea. The costs are unbearable, but we have no choice as demand in this season in the UK is very high," said Mr Kimanga.

He said dealers were incurring losses but have to sustain the market.

"The UK market is very sensitive, and once we fail to supply on time, the country will be categorised as an irregular supplier, which will affect future tea sales. We need to protect the UK market after losing the Sudan and Iran markets," he said.

The association is also facing difficulties importing packaging materials, with some consignments stuck at Mombasa port for over three weeks due to congestion.

Kenya is a primary supplier of tea to the UK, with exports valued at approximately \$138.5 million in 2024, representing a significant portion of the UK's black tea imports. While Pakistan remains Kenya's largest buyer, the UK continues to hold a strong, consistent market position.

nation between port authorities, shippers, government agencies, cargo owners, freight forwarders, and inland transport operators has worsened congestion, which is now at its peak. Port authorities say they are aware of the congestion problem and are working on it.

"The KPA and the KRA have unveiled joint measures to reduce cargo dwell time and expedite customs clearance," said Captain William Ruto, the KPA Managing Director. He was referring to the joint operations with Kenya Railways Corporation.

"The interventions are part of a broader government strategy to improve cargo evacuation, particularly for long-stay containers, and reinforce the Northern Corridor's competitiveness as the region's primary trade artery," he told The EastAfrican.

On average, more than 500 empty containers remain on trucks daily, waiting to be offloaded due to limited space at the six Empty Container Depots. Shipping lines are paying over \$38,497 a day for unattended vessels.

Since October last year, Mombasa port has faced delays, with about 20 vessels

waiting at any given time, as disputes continue over responsibility for the inefficiency. The rising cost of cargo delivery has shifted vessel patterns, with shippers preferring Dar es Salaam over Mombasa. Previously, most vessels docked at Mombasa before proceeding to Tanzania, but delays have altered this trend.

The Kenya Ships Agents Association (KSAA) reports that hiring a vessel costs an average of Ksh4.4 million (\$34,000) per day, excluding other expenses such as fuel, insurance, and maintenance. The disruption continues to inflate freight costs across the region.

"Port congestion at Mombasa continues to place heavy operational and financial pressure on shipping lines. When vessels remain idle for extended periods, costs escalate rapidly, with crew costs also rising as delays extend working time and welfare obligations," said KSAA CEO Elijah Mbaru.

Mombasa port has been receiving increased cargo, but inadequate yards, depots, handling terminals, and scanners have compounded the problem. At Port Reitz cargo exit station, the rail-mounted scanner has been out of service for two months, causing significant delays for Kenya Railways (KR) and the Kenya Revenue Authority (KRA) in processing cargo for the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR).

Containers must now be scanned upon arrival at the Nairobi Inland Container Depot (ICD), where only two of four drive-through scanners are operational.

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Captain William Ruto, KPA Managing Director