



The charred wreckage of a Devine Coaches bus, recently got burnt while en route stands as a stark reminder of how quickly a routine journey can turn into a life-threatening emergency when fire breaks out on the road. PHOTO/COURTESY

What to do when your car catches fire

Vehicle fires on Uganda's roads are rising quietly but dangerously. From sudden smoke on highways to buses engulfed within minutes, experts warn that what you do in the first seconds can mean the difference between survival and total loss.

BY GEOFFREY OYET OKWERA

300

Alarming. In Uganda, vehicle fires are becoming an increasingly visible road safety concern, with an estimated 300 motor vehicles destroyed by fire in 2024 alone, highlighting the urgent need for better maintenance, faster emergency response, and greater driver awareness on highways.

At first, it is rarely dramatic. A faint burning smell. A thin trail of smoke rising from the bonnet. A warning light that is easy to ignore. But on Uganda's highways, those early signs can turn into full-blown fire in minutes, leaving passengers with almost no time to react.

Earlier this year, on the Mpigi-Kampala highway at Kalagala, a Trinity Bus Services vehicle caught fire while travelling towards Rwanda. Eyewitnesses say smoke had already been visible long before the bus stopped, but the warning went unheeded as it continued at high speed.

One witness, Salongo Mutyaba, recalls trying to alert the driver as smoke thickened. The bus, however, kept moving until it reached the Mawonge curve. By then, flames had taken over the engine compartment. When it finally stopped, passengers were forced into a frantic escape through doors and windows as fire spread rapidly through the luggage hold and seating



ESSENTIAL ITEMS EVERY VEHICLE SHOULD CARRY FOR FIRE EMERGENCIES

1. Fire extinguisher
 - Must be fully charged and functional.
 - Should be easily accessible, not locked away or buried under luggage.
 - Needs regular inspection and servicing.
2. Reflective warning triangle
 - Used to alert other road users during emergencies.
 - Helps prevent secondary accidents on highways
 - Should be placed at a safe distance behind the vehicle.
3. Emergency hammer/window breaker
 - Used to break windows when doors are jammed or inaccessible.
 - Essential for quick evacuation during fire situations.
4. First aid kit
 - For treating burns and minor injuries during evacuation.
 - Should include basic medical supplies such as bandages and burn relief items.
 - Needs periodic restocking and checking.
5. Emergency contact-ready mobile phone
 - Should have saved contacts for police and fire rescue services.
 - Helps speed up emergency response.
 - Ideally kept charged at all times during travel.
6. Accessible emergency exits (for buses)
 - Must be functional and not blocked by luggage.
 - Should be clearly marked and easy to open.
 - Regular checks needed to ensure usability in emergencies.

area. Within minutes, the bus was destroyed.

Weeks later, another bus belonging to Devine Coaches also caught fire on the Kampala-Moyo route via Gulu. Passengers and crew escaped, but the vehicle was reduced to a burnt shell. In both cases, survival depended not on firefighting but on how fast people reacted.

These incidents are no longer rare. They are becoming part of a growing pattern on Uganda's roads.

A silent but rising road danger

Fire and rescue data show that Uganda recorded about 1,280 fire incidents in 2024. Of these, an estimated 300 to 380 involved motor vehicles. Many of these vehicles were destroyed.

What is most concerning is the speed at which the fire spreads. Once a fire starts in a vehicle, it can engulf the entire structure in under five minutes. On highways, where emergency response is often distant, this leaves almost no chance for containment.

Experts say the problem is not only mechanical failure but also delayed maintenance, poor driver response, and limited emergency preparedness.

Why vehicles catch fire

Michael Kalyango, a mechanic based in Bweyogerere, Wakiso District, says most vehicle fires begin long before any visible smoke appears.

"People wait until a car breaks down completely before servicing it," he says. "By then, the risk is already high."

He identifies three main causes: overheating engines, fuel system leaks, and electrical faults.

When coolant levels drop or a radiator fails, engine heat builds rapidly. Without cooling, metal components become dangerously hot, increasing fire risk.

Fuel leaks from cracked pipes or loose fittings can ignite instantly

when exposed to heat. Electrical faults, often hidden behind dashboards or engine compartments, can spark without warning.

Oil leaks also contribute, dripping onto hot engine parts and igniting within seconds.

Kalyango further warns about flammable items like oxygen cylinders, petrol, kerosene, or gas cylinders stored in vehicles, noting that they can fuel fire spread and reduce survival chances.

What to do

Road safety expert Simon Kutyalo says the first seconds determine survival.

"The moment you see smoke or smell burning, stop the vehicle immediately," he says. "Do not try to confirm."

He advises drivers to cut fuel to the engine instantly to cut fuel to the electrical supply. Passengers should evacuate without delay, prioritising life over luggage or personal belongings.

"People often lose valuable items trying to save their belongings," Kutyalo explains. "But when a fire has taken out, everything can be replaced except life."

If a fire extinguisher is available, it should be used quickly and correctly, targeting the base of the flames. However, he warns that once fire is beyond control, evacuation is the only safe option.

Drivers are strongly cautioned against opening the bonnet if flames are suspected, as introducing oxygen can cause the fire to flare up. Emergency services should be contacted immediately so that responders can take over the situation.

Preventing fire before it starts

Experts agree that most vehicle fires are preventable with consistent maintenance. Routine servicing of the cooling system, fuel lines, and electrical wiring is essential. Mechanics are urged to check coolant levels before every long journey and inspect for leaks or unusual smells.

Public transport vehicles are required by law to carry functional fire extinguishers and have clearly marked emergency exits. However, enforcement remains inconsistent, especially on long-distance routes.

Regular inspection of modified electrical systems is also important, as unsafe installations are a growing source of vehicle fires.

When every second matters

The greatest danger in vehicle fires is speed. A small electrical spark or fuel leak can escalate into a full-blown fire in minutes.

That is why experts stress preparedness over reaction. Knowing what to do before an emergency occurs is as important as the response itself.

Motorists with insurance are advised to notify insurers immediately after ensuring passengers are safe, to begin the claims process without delay.

Vehicle fires are becoming an increasing reality on Uganda's roads. While most passengers escape, vehicles are rarely saved.

Behind each burnt bus or car is a familiar story: minor mechanical faults, delayed servicing, and slow reaction in the critical first moments.

As experts warn, the question is no longer whether a vehicle might catch fire. It is whether those inside know what to do when it does and whether they can act fast enough to survive it.