Karamoja water crisis deepens as major dam dries up

BY SIMON PETER EMWAMU

MOROTO. Anxiety has gripped pastoral communities in Moroto District after the 2.6 billion-litre Kobebe dam dried up, putting nearly 700,000 heads of livestock at risk and triggering fresh migration across Karamoja Sub-region.

For more than two decades, the dam, located along the Uganda–Kenya border, has been the main water source for pastoralists in greater Karamoja and neighbouring Turkana communities in Kenya. During prolonged dry spells, it has served as a critical lifeline, sustaining livestock and supporting cross-border co-existence.

However, local leaders say the once-dependable reservoir has nearly run dry, with only about one million litres of water remaining.

Mr John Robert Adupa, the chairperson of Lotisan Sub-county in Moroto District, said the dam dried up about two weeks ago, forcing desperate herders to dig makeshift trenches along the dried riverbed in search of water for their animals.

"We don't know what has gone wrong. This dam is designed to withstand extreme heatwaves, but that has not been the case this time," Mr Adupa said.

He added that hundreds of herders have started moving their livestock northwards to Kotido and Kaabong districts, while others are trekking towards Napak in search of water and pasture.

The Moroto District Production Officer, Dr Francis Inangolet, confirmed that only about one million litres of water remain, an amount he described as grossly insufficient for the estimated 700,000 heads of cattle currently concentrated around the Kobebe belt.

"If it does not rain in the next two weeks, there will be nothing left," Dr Inangolet warned, adding that both livestock and human populations face serious danger if the dry spell persists.

WHY DAM MATTTERS

Constructed to support livestock trade and promote peaceful co-existence between the Karamojong and Turkana communities, Kobebe dam has long served as a shared resource during drought.

He noted that this is the first time in at least 16 years that the dam has completely dried up, raising concerns about possible structural or environmental factors.

"We have not yet established why the water facility has dried up, but we are questioning whether ongoing road construction in the area could have interfered with water flow into the dam. Engineers from the water department will have to determine that," he said.

Dr Inangolet also suggested that the dam may require urgent desilting to restore its water retention capacity.

Constructed to promote livestock trade and peaceful co-existence between the Karamojong and Turkana communities, the dam has historically helped ease tensions during drought by providing a shared resource. With the current crisis deepening, pastoralists on both sides of the border are facing harsh realities as animals grow weaker due to a lack of water and pasture. District officials confirmed that large herds are already being driven towards Napak, Kotido and Kaabong districts as a temporary mitigation measure while communities await rainfall.

Beyond the looming livestock losses, officials have warned of potential public health concerns.

"Human beings are equally at risk of severe health complications arising from dehydration and related conditions," Dr Inangolet said.

CamScanner