Motorists cheer progress on new Katonga Bridge

The old Katonga Bridge was washed away in May 2023 by flash floods.

BY ANTONIO KALYANGO & BRIAN A KESIIME

Motorists using the Masaka-Kampala highway are excited about the visible progress on the new bridge being erected over River Katonga in Mpigi District.

The old bridge was damaged in May 2023 following devastating flash floods that swept through the area, paralysing transport along the usually busy high-

Currently, motorists going to Masaka are using the temporary steel bridge while those heading to Kampala use the old concrete bridge.

Mr Suleiman Ahmed, a long-distance truck driver transporting cargo to the Democratic Republic of Congo, said the project's progress gives them hope for a near completion. However, he asked the government to prioritise widening of the Kampala -Masaka highway to match the new bridge's standard.

"Erecting a good bridge without widening the highway, will not address the road carnage problem on the highway. That is because most accidents are head-on collisions, a clear indication that they occur when one is trying to overtake on a narrow road," he added

Mr Justus Tumusiime, another truck driver on the Kampala-Tanzania route, echoed similar concerns, saying the widening of the Masaka highway should be prioritised given its significance as a regional artery.

"We need dual-carriage highways due to the increasing traffic. We ask the government to copy what our neighbours in Kenya did (constructing super highways connecting to Nairobi City)," he said.

Unlike the old bridge, Samuel Ssenfuka, a taxi operator on the Kampala-Masaka route, observed that the new bridge is raised above the surface of the water, hence not prone to flash floods.



Left is the new bridge erected over River Katonga. Motorists from Kampala are currently using the temporary bridge on the right. PHOTO/BRIAN A KESIIME

The China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) is undertaking the project for Shs191b.

Ms Sarah Karungi, the project manager of Katonga bridge construction on Masaka-Kampala highway, noted that the construction works stand at 60 percent and they hope to handover the project before December.

"We've not faced serious challenges, and we're focusing on delivering the project before the set deadline," she said.

Early this month, the State minister of Transport, Mr Musa Ecweru, and other ministry officials inspected the project and were impressed by the ongoing works.

The team proceeded to Villa Maria-Kabulasoke Road, where Rodo Contractors Limited is erecting a permanent bridge over the same river (Katonga upstream) as flash floods also washed away culverts during the same period.

Mr Ambrose Sserunjogi, the project manager, revealed that the Shs63b project will be handed over by July despite various challenges like unpredictable rains, which raise water volumes.

THE HIGHWAY

According to the Ministry of Works and Transport, Kampala-Masaka highway is one of the busiest roads in the country with an average daily traffic count of about 30,000 vehicles. It is the main gateway to the DRC, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi, handling major cargo to and fro. River Katonga flows through several districts, including Mubende, Kiruhura, Sembabule, Butambala, Ibanda, Bukomansimbi, Mityana, Kalungu, Gomba and Mpigi before draining into Lake Victoria.

Mr James Walusimbi, a trader dealing in agricultural produce, who we found boarding a canoe to cross River Katonga from Kalungu District to Gomba District, noted that their businesses have suffered since May 2023 due to the extra charges they incur.

When the culverts were washed away, local leaders from Kalungu and Gomba districts provided two wooden canoes, which helped travellers to cross to either side of the river at a fee between Shs5,000 and Shs10,000.

"Transporting our merchandise across the river is costly. With the government efforts, we are hopeful that this will soon be behind us. We pray that this road will also be fully tarmacked to ease connectivity to the two districts," he noted.

Currently, motorists from Kalungu connecting to Gomba use the Sembabule-Kisozi-Kifampa Road or Masaka-Kampala Road and branch off from Kayabwe in Mpigi District. That makes the journey longer by 120km and 95km respectively.

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