

The struggle to keep water ambulances operational

While water ambulances have reduced deaths on island districts, high maintenance and fuel costs have made them tough to operate.

BY DENIS EDEMA

Health authorities in Uganda's island districts are struggling with the high cost of maintaining and fuelling water ambulances, raising concerns about their reliability despite their proven life-saving role.

District health officers say the ambulances have greatly improved emergency response, particularly for expectant mothers who previously faced life-threatening delays while being transported to better-equipped facilities.

However, findings indicate that some officials lack clear knowledge about how the water ambulance system operates, including details on fuel voucher allocations and accountability.

A total of 14 boats were distributed to districts such as Jinja, Obongi, Amolatar, Kumi, Serere, Ntoroko, Buvuma, Mayu-



Ntoroko District leaders inspect the new ambulance boat in 2023. PHOTO/ ALEX ASHABA

BACKGROUND

The water ambulances were introduced by the Ministry of Health in 2023 to address transport challenges in hard-to-reach island communities.

ge, Kabale, Kalangala, Namayingo, and Mukono.

The ambulances operate under a joint management framework involving the Uganda People's Defence Force, the Uganda Police Force, local governments, and the Ministry of Water and Environment.

Each vessel is staffed with a trained team that includes a navigator, a coxswain, and a paramedic. Guidelines restrict their use to medical emergencies, prohibiting routine transport or the carrying of bodies unless a patient dies during transit.

The struggles

Mr Matayasi Mageni, the acting district health officer of Namayingo District, said the ambulance reduces travel time from four to six hours to just 24 to 30 minutes, making it critical for saving lives, particularly among expectant mothers.

However, the ambulance requires

around 600 litres of fuel and is currently grounded due to lack of fuel. That is despite about a quarter of the population living on more than 13 islands.

Mr Mageni emphasised that the large amounts of fuel needed make fuel costs high not forgetting the high maintenance fees that make referrals costly.

"The district receives fuel through a quarterly voucher system, but this allocation is only enough for a single trip due to the long distances between islands," he said.

He suggested that funds spent on fuel could instead be used to upgrade Sigulu Health Centre to a higher level so patients can be treated on the island.

In Obongi, Dr Joseph Arike, the health officer said the district's water ambulance has been out of service since last year after colliding with a hippopotamus and is still awaiting repairs.

He added that the boat had been vital for referrals within the district and for patients from neighbouring Adjumani District, especially refugees living along the Nile River.

"We are now facing challenges in picking up referred patients. Despite fuel constraints, management tries to ensure there is always an emergency option," Dr Arike said, adding that the matter was reported to the ministry, which promised to act.

He called for urgent repairs, stressing that the ambulance is essential alongside road vehicles.

Mr Emmanuel Ainebyoona, the senior communications officer at the Ministry of Health, acknowledged the challenges and said the ministry had allocated additional funds for fuel cards.

"We are glad that in the next financial year, the ministry has added some money for fuel," Mr Ainebyoona said.