

A bulldozer demolishes a structure at St Balikuddembe (Owino) Market, on the Nakivubo Channel on March 7. PHOTO/IBRAHIM KAVUMA

After a non-negotiable compensation of Shs3m at 6pm, demolition took place at 9pm.

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For years, the small cluster of lock-up shops in the Kivumbi section of St Balikuddembe Market, popularly known as Owino, in Kampala, stood at the centre of a bitter dispute over ownership and redevelopment.

But on a tense March 7 evening, the long-running conflict took a dramatic turn when the traders were given only a few hours to vacate before bulldozers moved in.

Mr Mahad Lukwago, the chairperson of Kasodde and the adjoining area, said the destruction of the busy trading hub was preceded by months of rumours, negotiations, and court battles.

He said the traders first heard rumours of the demolition shortly after City Businessman Ham Kiggundu carried out an earlier demolition in a nearby section of the market.

He said the traders became concerned and decided to challenge the move in court.

"I also reached out to Mr Kiggundu and asked him to notify the traders early enough so they could remove their property," he said in an interview yesterday.

However, Mr Lukwago said many of the occupants insisted on not leaving, arguing that they had operated in the area for years and could not just be evicted without clear justification.

Mr Kiggundu, however, maintained that the structures in question were not part of the official plan of Owino.

"He insisted that the structures belonging to Mr Kivumbi were not included in the official market plan. He also argued that tenants were stopped from paying rent for some years," Mr Lukwago explained.

Despite the dispute, the traders said the eviction happened swiftly on Saturday. Mr Lukwago said most of the tenants were given Shs3m each as compensation at around 6pm, and asked to remove their property before 9pm. After that, the demolition started.

How Owino Market demolition unfolded

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The demolished section reportedly had about 48 traders operating in shops located both in front and behind the structures.

Mr Lukwago said most of the traders managed to remove their belongings in time, although two businesses - a salon and a store - were affected even though they were not part of the targeted structures.

Roots of the dispute

One of the affected occupants, Mr John Baptist Kivumbi, said the dispute dates back decades.

Mr Kivumbi said when he and other traders first occupied the land in 1997, it was being used as a garbage collection point.

"We were given that area to develop because it was a garbage dumping site. We built structures there and later asked the authorities to grant us a lease," he said.

Mr Kivumbi, however, said their request for a lease from Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) was rejected,

and they were instead asked to operate as tenants.

"We went to court and were advised to resolve the issue outside the court and apply for a lease under our association. We later succeeded in obtaining it," he said.

But Mr Kivumbi said the situation changed in 2020 when President Museveni directed that the city markets be returned to the government because of alleged mismanagement.

"After the President's directive, KCCA took over the markets. But we rejected that move because the structures were ours," he said.

He added that KCCA later relented and allowed the original tenants to remain in the shops and directed them not to pay rent for several years.

"We even went to court and KCCA said the old tenants were still occupying the shops and there was no problem," he said.

Rumours before demolition

But Mr Kivumbi said the rumours surfaced last year that the structures might be demolished as part of a redevelopment plan linked to Mr Kiggundu yet the case was still in court.

He added that attempts to contact Mr Kiggundu for clarification and more talks to settle the issue have been unsuccessful.

"I have been trying to reach out to him but he has not been picking up my calls or responding to my messages," Mr Kivumbi said.

KCCA distances self

In an interview on Tuesday, Mr Daniel NuweAbine, the spokesperson of KCCA, said: "We are aware of the demolition but did not issue any demolition permit for that structure. We have already issued a statement on the matter. Police are currently carrying out investigations and we are waiting for the findings. We believe the process will help establish what happened and provide the

necessary solutions."

Death reported during demolition

A witness, who preferred anonymity because of the sensitivity of the matter, said a man believed to be a scrap collector, who had been moving around the demolition site died.

"We don't know him, but he was one of the street boys who usually move around the market picking up metal pieces," the witness said.

The witness added that the man was suspected to have been collecting pieces of iron from the rubble when the incident happened.

The Kampala Metropolitan Police Spokesperson, Ms Rachael Kawala, confirmed that an unidentified body was found near the demolition area in Owino Market. "We're still investigating the cause of death and identify the body before reaching out to his relatives,"

About redevelopment

Following a directive from President Museveni on August 2, 2023, which approved a proposal by Ham Enterprises to build over the Nakivubo Channel, the company began clearing and preparing the channel, including sections near Owino Market around August 13, 2025.

The project involves widening, desilting, cleaning, and covering the Nakivubo Channel, specifically aiming to address flooding and waste management with plans to construct commercial properties above the covered sections.

While work started in August last year, it faced significant controversy regarding environmental impact assessments by Nema, the national environment agency, and approvals from KCCA, leading to temporary halts in operations.

By mid-October 2025, work was reported to be around 16 percent complete and has never been halted again.

The redevelopment involved modernising the drainage infrastructure and enhancing the area around Owino.



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