Arua City on edge amid rise in criminal gangs

Many residents have resorted to retiring home early to avoid being victims of thugs who strike under the cover of darkness.

BY FELIX WAROM OKELLO

At daybreak, Arua City moves with familiar urgency. By 6am, vendors call out prices, boda boda riders jostle for passengers, and children hurry to school. It is a city defined by hustle and motion.

But at sunset, that movement carries a different energy. People walk faster, but more cautiously.

What was once a natural rhythm now feels edged with unease, as residents adjust to a growing sense of insecurity.

For years, Ms Loyce Oleru depended on late hours to sustain her small grocery shop. Workers returning home would stop by for essentials, making evenings her busiest time. Today, she closes before dark.

"I am surviving; that is why I am hurrying up," she said on Monday. "I was once robbed at the shop when I used to close late. So, I am nervous each time," Ms Oleru adds.

Her experience reflects a wider reality. Across the city, residents speak of stolen phones, break-ins and robberies occurring both day and night.

What unsettles many is not just the frequency, but the unpredictability.

That fear intensified on April 29 along Rhino Camp Road in Old Bus Park Cell.

At around 8am, a young man allegedly attempted to snatch a woman's bag. He was caught, and within moments, a crowd gathered.

Armed with stones and clubs, the mob beat him repeatedly. By the time police arrived, he had died at the scene.

At the police general inquiry office, the pressure is evident. Complainants continue to stream in, reporting thefts of phones, money and household items.

West Nile Regional Police spokesperson Josephine Angucia condemned mob action.

"We continue to condemn acts of 'mob justice' in communities as it is not only unlawful but barbaric," she said.

Tensions have also spilled onto the streets. On April 27, police clashed with youths along Adumi Road as protests broke out following the killing.

Authorities link much of the insecurity to idle youth.

"We encourage youths to engage in more productive income-generating activities other than stealing and robbing," Ms Angucia added.



Boda boda riders on Avenue Street in Arua City. The street is a crime hotspot. PHOTO/FELIX WAROM OKELLO

39 charged

Police operations have intensified. On April 27, 93 suspects were arrested, with 39 charged under rogue and vagabond laws. Still, many residents feel the response is not enough.

On March 23, two men were killed in Buniababa Trading Centre over alleged motorcycle theft.

On April 27, another suspected thief was killed by a mob in Komite Ward. Similar reports continue to surface across the city.

> **Residents' pain.** "In some areas within the city, you cannot move with any valuables during the day time. They can attack you within a second," **Daniel Dratibi, director of Voice of Restoration**

Although police data shows a decline in overall crime in West Nile—from 7,608 cases in 2023 to 5,579 in 2025—residents say their daily experiences suggest otherwise.

The same report recorded 68 mob action killings in 2025, alongside rising cases of phone and motorcycle theft.

Mr Daniel Dratibi, the director of Voice of Restoration, attributes the crime to unemployment and substance abuse among youth.

"In some areas within the city, you cannot move with any valuables during the day time. They can attack you within a second," he said.

He called for investment in job training and income-generating programmes to redirect young people away from crime.

Investigations by the *Daily Monitor* suggest some of the theft is organised. Stolen motorcycles and valuables are quickly moved across borders into DR Congo and South Sudan, where they are sold cheaply.

Number plates are removed overnight, and the bikes transported through unofficial routes, making recovery difficult.

Within the city, the groups operate under names such as Fire Eaters, Manya Boys, Gaza Boys, among others, with activities concentrated in areas including Rhino Camp Road, Wadriff Road, Kirabu and Ediofe. For boda boda riders, the risks are immediate.

KEY FACTS ON ARUA CRIME

- Police data shows a decline in reported cases, even as fear persists among residents:
- **2023:** 7,608 cases reported
- **2024:** 6,098 cases
- **2025:** 5,579 cases

Breakdown (2025)
- 246 motorcycle theft cases
- 180 mobile phone theft cases
- 68 mob action killings

Mr James Opar recently encountered that danger when a passenger insisted on using a poorly lit road toward Jiako.

"I wanted to use the one via the airfield," he said. "And little did I know that we would fall into a trap."

They were attacked and robbed. Though his motorcycle was spared, the experience changed him.

"I have vowed never to use that road," he said.

Across the city, daily routines are shifting. Parents now escort children to school.

Shopkeepers install extra locks or hire guards, though many admit this offers limited reassurance.

For university student Alicia Ochola, the impact has been personal. She came to Arua seeking independence, but now moves within a shrinking map of "safe" places. One night in 2025, she went out with friends despite her fears. On returning, she found her room broken into and her laptop stolen.

"It was not about bravery. It was about risk," she said.

City authorities say they are responding, with increased patrols and community meetings. Government programmes aimed at engaging youth are also being promoted.

Assistant Resident City Commissioner for Ayivu Division Polly Ongom said stability is essential.

"We need our people to live in a peaceful environment," he said. "Insecurity is not good for development."

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