

150 Lands ministry staff laid off in major shakeup

The move, insiders say, has caused anxiety, frustration and emotional distress among affected workers whose contracts expired and were not renewed.

BY FRANKLIN DRAKU

The Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development has let go of more than 150 contract staff as it moves to implement a sweeping restructuring of its agencies and departments under the government's Rationalisation of Government Agencies and Public Expenditure (RAPEX) framework.

The move, insiders say, has caused anxiety, frustration and emotional distress among affected workers whose contracts expired and were not renewed. Sources within the ministry further indicate that more staff could be affected in the coming months as the restructuring process deepens.

However, the ministry's spokesperson, Mr Denis Obbo, yesterday told this publication that the affected contract staff were not "fired" but are instead being re-absorbed into the ministry as permanent and pensionable employees under the public service structure.

While the ministry has not disclosed which departments have been most affected, insider accounts indicate that the contract staff cut across several departments, particularly those implementing donor-funded projects.

One source noted that contract staff were often better remunerated than their counterparts on the government payroll, prompting some civil servants to leave permanent positions in favour of project-based roles with higher pay.

A February 2 internal memo issued by Permanent Secretary Dorcus Okalany stated that contracts which had expired were only extended up to March, after which affected staff would be relieved of their duties at the end of the month.

"Reference is made to the government decision to streamline the service under the Rationalisation of Government Agencies and Public Expenditure (RAPEX) framework. The ministry received officers from the former National Roads Authority. In addition, the ministry has received officers from the recently concluded Graduate Recruitment Exercise who were appointed, inducted and deployed across the departments and ministry zonal offices," Ms Okalany wrote.

Contract staff are typically recruited on fixed-term arrangements to support donor-funded projects within the ministry. According to sources, many of these projects have now concluded, leaving government without the financial capacity to continue sustaining such positions, even where similar work continues under government funding.

The developments at the Lands ministry reflect a broader trend across government, where agencies are being merged, scrapped or returned to parent



Ms Dorcus Okalany, the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development. PHOTO/COURTESY

ministries as part of the rationalisation programme.

In her communication, Ms Okalany informed both exiting contract staff and heads of departments that the ministry is constrained and unable to continue engaging staff on local contract terms.

"In this regard, the ministry has: (a) renewed all expired contracts up to March 2026; and (b) processed all salary arrears for the above period. The purpose of this communication therefore is to discharge you from your respective duties," she stated.

Looking back

A 2017 comprehensive restructuring report by the Ministry of Public Service had earlier identified several structural and legal challenges within the Lands ministry that required reform to improve efficiency and service delivery.

The report highlighted that laws governing land management, housing and urban development are fragmented across multiple Acts, many of which are inconsistent and fail to coherently address sector challenges.

Among the laws cited were the Land Acquisition Act (Cap. 226), the Land Act (Cap. 227), the Mortgage Act (Cap. 229), the Town and Country Planning Act (Cap. 230), the Physical Planning Act (2010), the Traditional Rulers (Restitution of Assets and Properties) Act (Cap. 247), the Condominium Properties Act, the Rating Act, the Surveyors Registration Act (Cap. 275), and the Architects Registration Act (Cap. 269).

It further pointed out that overlapping mandates across institutions have led to duplication of roles.

For instance, while the Physical Planning Act (2010) establishes district and urban physical planning committees, the Local Governments Act (Cap. 243) provides for technical planning committees and planning units for the same jurisdictions.

The report also observed that multiple actors—including resident district commissioners, chief administrative officers, district chairpersons (LCs), and the Office of the President—are involved in land conflict resolution, often leading to duplication and, in some cases, legally questionable decisions.

To address these issues, the restructuring recommended a streamlined institutional framework headed by a Permanent Secretary as the chief executive and accounting officer.

The proposed structure includes directorates such as Land Administration—

BACKGROUND

The Rationalisation of Government Agencies and Public Expenditure (RAPEX) is a government policy initiative aimed at improving efficiency, reducing duplication, and ensuring sustainability in the public sector. Launched under the Ministry of Public Service, RAPEX was designed to streamline government operations, merge or abolish redundant agencies, and optimise the use of limited public resources.

Justification.
We have had projects that were paying these staff come to an end. Government cannot continue with that arrangement, so a decision had to be taken to recruit staff into the public service," Denis Obbo, Lands ministry spokesperson.

comprising departments of Land Registration, Land Inspection and Reform, Surveys and Mapping, Valuation Services, and the National Land Information Centre—as well as Housing Development and Estates Management, and Physical Planning and Urban Development.

Support units were also proposed, including finance and administration, planning and policy analysis, human resource management, communications, internal audit, procurement, and affiliated institutions such as the Uganda Land Commission and professional boards.

Under the new structure, the ministry is expected to operate with an approved staff establishment of 830 positions, with 332 based at headquarters and the remainder deployed to zonal offices and the National Land Information Centre. The projected annual wage bill is estimated at Shs8.3 billion.

Ministry strategy

Mr Obbo maintained that the restructuring is not intended to push out staff but to formalise employment within a sustainable government framework.

"Contrary to what has been portrayed, the ministry has not fired the contract staff. What has happened is that restructuring provided an opportunity to fill positions within the ministry," he said.

He explained that the end of donor-funded projects necessitated the shift, as the government could no longer sustain contract-based payments.

"We have had projects that were paying these staff come to an end. Government cannot continue with that arrangement, so a decision had to be taken to recruit staff into the public service," he said.

Mr Obbo added that former contract staff were encouraged to apply for available positions and were given priority due to their experience, although he did not disclose how many had been successfully absorbed.

He further revealed that more recruitment opportunities will soon be advertised, particularly for zonal offices, and that former contract staff will again be prioritised.

"We still have more adverts coming up, and priority will be given to ensure that those who were on contract are fitted into the system. The aim is not to terminate them but to formalise their employment," he said.

He emphasised that the transition is being handled carefully to avoid disruption of government programmes and loss of skilled personnel.

"We are trying to do this systematically and fairly to ensure a smooth transition. We do not want to lose people we have trained over time and then start from scratch," he said.