

Kiyindi-Buvuma ferry: a disaster waiting to strike

BY ROBERT MUDHASI

I could clearly see the worry on the face of the vehicle registration and loading officer at Kirongo landing site in Buvuma, as the morning ferry kept on filling up with loaded vehicles, bobabodas, merchandise and people. This was on January 12 this year.

The white line that marks the maximum water level, below which the ferry should not sink was slowly disappearing. But more people, mostly traders going to Kiyindi on the mainland, were still boarding, since their goods were already on the aging vessel.

The landing gear was the only place for the last 40 or so desperate people who wanted to go to the mainland to sell their farm produce or to shop. They crammed on the landing gear and the ferry tilted forward as the white line disappeared under the water.

The ferry's old engines revved up a note higher to pull the vessel out of the landing site. It groaned and puked up smoke as the engines finally pulled the overloaded ferry away from the mound of earth called a landing platform. I thought it was nosediving as it turned to face Kiyindi side.

The Police officer who had been registering the travellers said the gear on one side had already given way, the reason why the ferry had to turn to ensure that the only landing gear left had to face Kiyindi.

Normally, the ferry is like a train; there is no front or back. It just moves in the direction it is facing. The landing gears are also supposed to be lifted up to prevent people, cars

and any load from rolling off, in case of any turbulence. However, the many times I have used the ferries — Kayunga-Mbulamuti; Bukakata-Kalangala and Kiyindi-Buvuma — I have not seen the landing gears raised.

I decided to patiently wait for the second trip. I took some photos and video clips as the ferry sailed away, thinking that in case of any disaster, I would have the last record of the ill-fated vessel. I was surprised to see the ferry returning after three hours. Another hustle to board started.

Having parked my car since morning at about 9:00am, I joined another desperate lot who wanted to reach the mainland. I saw latecomers driving their cars onto the ferry as the officers in charge seemed not to care who had come first.

It was a district official who opened my eyes to the fact that some traders have a way with the ferry staff and get their goods and vehicles on the ferry before anyone else. My office ID and threats to expose this unfairness earned me a place on the ferry.

"The market day, Friday, is usually like this. Sometimes it is worse," the district official said. Many islanders cross to sell their produce and buy household items, but many more go to drink and enjoy themselves on the mainland in Kiyindi, Buikwe district. We always pray that the ferry does not sink under the weight," he explained.

Horrible landing

Apart from the overloading, the landing was shocking at both Kirongo and Kiyindi. The ferry just hits the mounds of earth with a thud, jolting and propelling everything on board forward. If you are standing, as many do, you may go crushing into your neighbour or the vehicles on board.