President's order for night Kalangala ferry falls flat

While campaigning in Kalangala on December 20, 2025, President Museveni directed that the ferries begin operating at night.

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More than a month after President Museveni directed that public ferries operating on the Bukakata–Bugoma route in Kalangala District begin night operations, travellers are still waiting, with officials citing a lack of formal government approval and unclear operational terms.

The two ferries, MV Ssese and MV Pearl, ply the 7km stretch linking Kalangala District to the mainland in Masaka District.

For years, islanders, particularly farmers, traders, and fishermen, have demanded night ferry trips, arguing that delays deny them access to early morning markets and cause financial losses.

The demand dates back to 2022, when district leadership first raised the issue, noting that agricultural produce and fish often arrive late in markets in Masaka City, causing losses to owners.

According to Mr Rajab Semakula, the Kalangala District chairperson, Kalangala Infrastructure Services (KIS), the company managing the two ferries, has repeatedly indicated that the ferries are technically capable of operating at night, but cannot do so without explicit government approval.

"The ferries are equipped for night navigation, but KIS needs government approval since the latter fully funds the operations," Mr Semakula said during an interview on Monday

The issue was again raised during President Museveni's visit to Kalangala in 2023, when district leaders reiterated their plea at a public rally held at Kibanga Primary School playground. The President pledged to look into the matter.

Last year, during a Ministry of Works and Transport performance survey of KIS in Kalangala, stakeholders again demanded night trips, citing growing traffic congestion at the docking piers.

According to KIS records, more than 20 vehicles are often left behind on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, while over 10 vehicles are routinely stranded from Monday to Thursday. These include heavy trucks carrying merchandise goods.



MV Pearl, one of the passenger ferries linking Masaka mainland to Kalangala Islands on January 12,2025. PHOTO/ FILE

The *Daily Monitor* has learnt that, at times, ferry operators are compelled to overload dangerous cargo trips with additional vehicles to reduce the backlog, raising safety concerns.

While campaigning in Kalangala on December 20, 2025, President Museveni directed that the ferries begin operating at night. However, the directive has not yet been enforced

Mr Joseph Mulindwa, the acting managing director of KIS, said all technical preparations for night operations are already in place.

"The ferries have long been equipped with lights and night navigation systems. We are ready to operate 24 hours, and we have also installed lighting systems at both docking stations to enhance night-time security," Mr Mulindwa explained.

He added that KIS has engaged the police to deploy officers at both docking piers in Bukakkata on the Masaka mainland side and Bugoma, Kalangala side to handle security during night operations.

FERRY SERVICES

Currently, two public ferries operate on the Bukakkata–Bugoma crossing, making about 16 trips a day between 7am and 6pm.

In the long-term, Mr Mulindwa said KIS plans to upgrade the ferry piers to international standards to further support night travel.

"We plan to set up restaurants, improve waiting bays, enhance lighting, and strengthen security so that passengers can travel safely at night," he said.

However, he stressed that implementation of the presidential directive requires follow-up from the district leadership.

"This is not for KIS alone. The district, as the main beneficiary, must follow up through the RDC and the CAO's office to ensure the President's directive is implemented," he said, adding that night operations would start immediately once government approval is granted.

Mr Semakula said the government has to demonstrate commitment to funding night ferry operations.

"We have pushed for night trips for years and even tried to include them in negotiations for a new payment agreement, but there is still no clear approval to fund night operations," he said.

Under the current arrangement, the government, through the Ministry of Works and Transport, fully funds ferry operations. Any additional trips, including night services, require approval to cater for fuel and staffing costs.

"Any increase in trips must be clearly provided for in the new agreement," Mr Semakula added.

Mr Fred Badda, the Kalangala Resident District Commissioner, said the government is still finalising policy guides on night ferry operations.

"We are waiting for the ministry to guide us on how the ferries will operate during the day and at night, and under new terms," he said.

He added that negotiations between the government and KIS are ongoing, and that night ferry trips are part of those discussions.

Government, through the ministries of Works and Transport and Finance, pays KIS to transport passengers and cargo free of charge. The last long-term agreement expired on July 31, 2025, after which KIS was granted a six-month interim contract, which is set to expire this month.

Mr Badda said night ferry travel may be allowed in emergencies even before the policy is finalised.

"In case of an emergency, a night trip would be inevitable as we wait for final guidelines," he said.

Traders in Kalangala say delays continue to hurt their businesses

Ms Irene Nakanwagi, a businesswoman, said trucks often fail to reach destinations on time after missing the last ferry trip.

"When our goods remain stranded at Bukakata pier, we lose customers and money. Government should speed up the negotiations so that we can benefit from night trips," she said.

Currently, two public ferries operate on the Bukakkata–Bugoma crossing, making about 16 trips a day between 7am and 6pm. Kalangala District leaders have for years asked the government to extend operations to at least 10pm and introduce an early 5am trip to ease congestion, support traders, and reduce traffic build-up, especially during peak periods like Christmas.

Kalangala District consists of 64 habitable islands interspersed with lush vegetation and is a top tourist destination.

Despite the district's natural beauty and contribution to the national economy, only a small fraction of its roads are tarmacked, and access to reliable water transport remains a major challenge, especially in Kyamuswa County.

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