Tears as Mbale City evicts street vendors

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BY FRED WAMBEDE & ANDREW WABUSHENDA

Yesterday morning, law enforcement officers, supported by police and the army, rolled through the streets of Mbale City with a grader, evicting street vendors in a bold move to restore order and streamline trade in the city.

The operation was forceful, sweeping everything in its path, including makeshift stalls and pit latrines, as dust filled the air. Vendors and temporary lock-ups on Naboa Road, Lorry Park, and North Road were among the first to be cleared.

The enforcement follows a directive issued last week, giving vendors five days to vacate streets as part of the city council's plan to regulate trade and relocate informal traders to gazetted markets.

According to the notice, all vendors operating in streets and non-designated areas, including those in the transport sector, were to move into approved market spaces.

As the evictions progressed, emotions ran high among traders. Mr Ayub Wambede, a fruit vendor operating behind Republic Street, said the move could derail his financial progress. Having recently received Shs1 million under the Parish Development Model (PDM) and invested in his business, he is now concerned about repayment.

"Now, I wonder how I'm going to repay the money after being removed from the streets," Mr Wambede said, adding that the council should have allocated them spaces in the markets before enforcing the eviction.

"The city council talked of having space in the markets, but for someone like me selling fruits, how can I get customers if I'm placed in upper rooms at Mbale Central Market?" he wondered.

Ms Agnes Nandutu, a young vegetable vendor on Kumi Road, expressed frustration, highlighting her struggles as a single mother. "This is where I have built my clientele. Now, I'm told to move to the market where I have no space," she said.

Ms Asiraf Naubuga, another street trader, appealed for permission to operate at night when shops are closed. She warned that without alternative options, many youths who depend on street vending could resort to crime or substance abuse.

Hajjat Fatuma, a vendor, urged President Museveni to intervene, noting the timing of the eviction coincides with parents preparing to pay school fees. "There is no adequate space in the markets. Authorities should first organise the markets before removing vendors from the streets," she said.



City enforcement officers evict vendors in Mbale City yesterday. PHOTO/ FRED WAMBEDE

What they say.

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Ayub Wambede, fruit vendor

However, city officials defended the exercise. Mr Geoffrey Mugisha, the town clerk in charge of the Industrial Division, said the operation was necessary to restore trade order. He refuted claims that markets lacked space, noting that Mbale Central Market alone has more than 1,000 vacant stalls capable of accommodating displaced vendors.

"The council had issued several warnings before the five-day ultimatum elapsed. Some vendors had occupied corridors and walkways meant for pedestrians," he said.

Mbale City Clerk Assy Abirebe added that the operation also aims to restore transport order by relocating passenger vehicles and lorries to designated parks. "We have previously moved lorries from Cathedral Avenue and directed taxis to park. For boda bodas, we have gazetted areas with signposts developed in consultation with rider leaders," he said.

The Deputy Resident City Commissioner, Mr Hamza Banja, noted that street congestion fosters criminal activity.

"Many criminals hide in these crowded areas, stealing from the public. We are helping the city council by providing security," he said.

In April last year, trucks and lorries were relocated from the central business district to Mpumude playgrounds but have since returned to Cathedral Avenue, Manafa Road, and Nkokonjeru Terrace. Similarly, taxis previously barred from Pallisa, Tororo, and Kumi Roads have resumed operations.

Residents have accused city officials of extorting money from vendors, which undermines enforcement efforts.

Mr Hakim Watenyeri, a senior citizen in Mbale City, said the enforcement team should be blamed for the flawed laws by the vendors because they collect money from them.

"This is not the first; they have been expelled, but they keep coming back because some of these enforcers are taking money from them," Mr Watenyeri said.

As the dust settles, the city council faces the challenge of balancing law enforcement, public order, and the livelihoods of thousands of informal traders who rely on the streets for survival.

BACKGROUND

Last week, Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) carried out a major crackdown on street vendors in the city centre, clearing roads and dismantling kiosks to restore order. Vendors complained about lack of alternative market spaces, while KCCA insisted thousands of vacant stalls exist across the city, including at Usafi, Busega, and Nakawa markets. The operation sparked tensions, with some traders vowing to return to busy street corners, highlighting the ongoing challenge of balancing urban order with livelihoods.

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