Okello murder trial: A case like no other

BY ANTHONY WESAKA & JULIET KIGONGO

KAMPALA. What began as a gruesome crime that stunned the nation quickly transformed into one of the most extraordinary criminal trials Uganda has witnessed in recent years, blending raw public emotion, experimental justice, and a series of dramatic scenes that kept the country gripped for the better part of the month of April.

On April 2, a man allegedly walked into Ggaba Early Childhood Development Programme and, in a chilling sequence, stabbed four toddlers aged between one and two-and-a-half years to death using a kitchen knife.

The suspect, who was later identified as a 38-year-old Christopher Okello Onyum, was arrested at the scene, triggering nationwide outrage and calls for swift justice.

In response, President Museveni reportedly directed the Judiciary to deploy a newly introduced mobile court system, allowing proceedings to be held within the community where the killings occurred.

The aim was to deliver justice in full public view, an approach rarely seen in Uganda's criminal justice system.

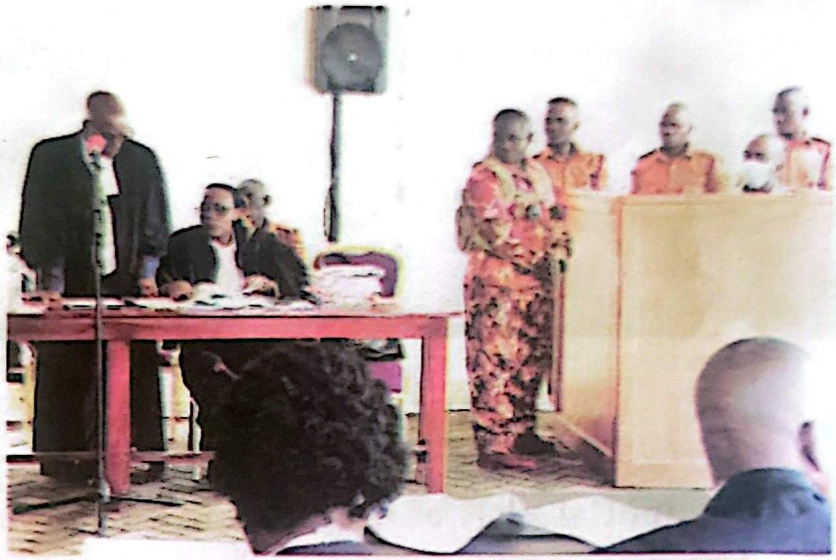
Within days, the Judiciary set up a makeshift courtroom at Ggaba Community Church playgrounds next to Lake Victoria, erecting large tents to accommodate lawyers, journalists, and hundreds of residents eager to follow the proceedings. What was initially expected to be a week-long trial instead stretched into three weeks after Okello pleaded not guilty to four counts of murder, compelling the prosecution to present its full case with a total of 18 witnesses.

But beyond the legal arguments, the trial became defined by a series of startling and, at times, chaotic scenes, some caused by Mother Nature.

On April 15, a prison van reversing toward the court venue failed to brake and ploughed into a group of journalists covering the proceedings. Ronald Mukhwana, a reporter with an online television, was seriously injured after the van ran over him, sending shockwaves through the court

A week later, Mother Nature struck. A sudden afternoon storm tore through the lakeside venue, ripping apart tents and forcing an abrupt suspension of court proceedings.

In a dramatic scene, strong winds dismantled the main structure sheltering the court, prompting security personnel to evacuate presiding judge Alice Komuhangi Khaukha as panicked attendees fled for safety. Nearby worshippers responded with fervent prayers as the storm intensified.



The prosecution team cross-examines Okello during the trial.

Religion became an unusual but consistent feature of the trial. Each day began with prayers led by a local pastor, invited by the court to dedicate proceedings to divine guidance, an uncommon practice in criminal trials but one that underscored the gravity and emotional weight of the case.

Inside the courtroom, attention often shifted to the demeanour of the accused. Okello was occasionally seen laughing behind his face mask, a behaviour his lawyer, Mr Richard Kumbuga, would later cite as indicative of possible mental illness.

Public sentiment, however, remained sharply divided. While many demanded harsh treatment for the suspect, others were struck by the court's adherence to constitutional principles.

Okello was provided with basic comforts, including bottled water, and was routinely greeted respectfully by the judge at the start of each session.

"Good morning, Mr Okello," Justice Khaukha would say—a gesture that drew criticism from sections of the public who expected a more punitive tone. Yet, legal experts noted that such conduct reflects the constitutional presumption of innocence until proven guilty.

As the marathon proceedings came to a close, the trial exposed tensions between public anger and judicial fairness, tested the practicality of mobile courts, and highlighted the unpredictable nature of administering justice in open community settings. With judgment expected today, the nation now turns its attention to the court's final word in a case that has already redefined the boundaries of Uganda's criminal trial process.

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