

STATEMENT TO PARLIAMENT ON UGANDANS STRANDED
ABROAD DUE TO AIRPORT AND BORDER CLOSURES FOLLOWING
THE OUTBREAK OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC,
28th MAY 2020

BY: HON. SAN KUTESA, MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

RT. Honorable Speaker and Honorable Members of Parliament, Government has taken the decision to allow Ugandans who have been stranded abroad due to the closure of the airport in Entebbe and of our borders, to return home in a phased and orderly manner. This decision was taken after very careful considerations that are meant to balance the need to bring home these brothers and sisters of ours but also to ensure the safety of our people at home.

Right Honorable Speaker on 11th of March 2020 the World Health Organization declared the Novel Corona virus (COVID-19) a global pandemic and in his statement, the Director General of the World Health Organization expressed concern about the severity of the outbreak and the relative inaction by many countries around the world to try and halt the spread of the disease.

In this regard, and as a measure to forestall a possible outbreak of the pandemic in Uganda, His Excellency the President, on Saturday 21st March 2020, announced the immediate closure of Uganda's

international borders and of Entebbe international airport, effective midnight on Sunday 22nd March 2020.

These closures were informed by an assessment done by the National Taskforce on Covid-19, which concluded that imported cases posed the highest possible source of an outbreak of the pandemic in this country.

Hon Members, while these closures were timely and done in the best interest of the country, they also created a parallel problem whereby several Ugandans who had traveled abroad on short visits for business, medical treatment, tourism and other valid reasons got stranded either in the countries which they were visiting or in transit countries as they traveled back home.

Additionally, **Hon. Members**, many Ugandan students who had completed their studies abroad were not able to return home on account of these travel restrictions.

In the Middle East, where many migrant workers got laid off from their jobs due to economic slowdown brought on by COVID-19, many Ugandans were unable to return home despite obtaining air tickets from their former employers.

Indeed, Government has been aware of all these resultant problems but like we have argued before, it was of strategic importance to first secure the homeland (the base) as we plan forth return of our fellow citizens who got caught up abroad.

Hon. Members we know that many of these stranded Ugandans have now run short of money and are largely dependent on the good will of either their hosts or on donations from friends. Government agrees therefore that this situation is no longer tenable and that it is time for them to start coming home.

In arranging for their return **Madame Speaker**, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs undertook to identify and register all the Ugandans who got stranded abroad on account of the airport and border closures and so far, our Missions abroad have so far registered close to 2,400 individuals who are stuck in 66 countries across the world. The list is herewith attached as **Annex 1**.

Madame Speaker and **Hon. Members**, Government has carefully reviewed this problem and taken note of the following:

1. The country has now built considerable domestic capacity to manage the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of structures, human resources and citizen awareness;

2. The numbers of our stranded citizens who intend to return home are fairly manageable (2,400) although they are spread across many countries (66);
3. In arranging for our citizens to return, there is need to ensure both the personal safety of the returnees as well as that of the communities they are coming to join.

In this regard; Government has agreed in Principle to allow all the Ugandans who got stranded abroad on account of the closure of the airport and borders to begin returning home in a phased manner starting with those who are in dire need. The exercise will be done within a framework that ensures both personal and public safety.

Madame Speaker, our view is that the first phase of these returns should be Ugandans who are stranded in distant places such as Europe, the Americas, West Africa, Eastern Asia and the Middle East. The reason for this being that they are more likely to be in dire need of help. Besides, many of them already have air tickets which they were traveling on before they were stopped and would simply need to revalidate those tickets. Additionally, Hon. Members, managing their arrival through the controlled environment of the airport will also give

us valuable experience on how to deal with even larger groups that may come through the land borders.

In implementing this exercise we should be cognizant of the capacity of our Health authorities to safely manage the numbers involved.

The next phase will then be for those in the neighboring countries who are most likely to come by car or on foot through the borders. By the time we embark on this next phase, the necessary structures and safeguards will have been set up at the border crossings.

Hon. Members, in this regard we have already started on the following implementation activities;

1. The concerned departments of Government are now setting up the specific requirements that they will need to ensure a safe and smooth implementation of this exercise;
2. My Ministry has already held discussions with some of the Airlines which still operates a wide network of routes around the world, such as Ethiopian Airlines, regarding the modalities by which they can pick our people from the different locations and bring them to a more central place such as Addis Ababa from where we can further arrange for special flights to bring them home;

3. We have also held discussions with the United Nations which still operates many humanitarian flights across Africa, to consider placing some of the stranded Ugandans on these flights as they transit through Entebbe or as they bring in their UN personnel. As you are aware, the airport in Entebbe is a UN logistics base and the United Nations continues to operate several nights in and out of Entebbe.
4. The World Food Programme will also be operating some humanitarian passenger flights in the region which we can take advantage of to return some of our people.
5. We have additionally met with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) who have agreed to consider assisting particularly our migrant workers who are stranded in the Middle East to return home. We are awaiting confirmation of their offer from their Regional offices.

The IOM has also agreed to support Government of Uganda in completing the ongoing modifications of the arrival area in Entebbe airport. These changes are meant to make the facility compliant with WHO and Ministry of Health social distancing standards.

6. I wish to also inform you that the Department For International Development (DFID) of the Government of the United Kingdom has donated to Government of Uganda a large tent which we will use to expand the arrival space at the airport and we are very grateful for this offer by the Government of the United Kingdom.
7. We have also engaged with the Government of the United Arab Emirates about assisting our migrant workers who have lost their jobs due to the economic effects of COVID-19 and now wish to come back home. In this regard, the UAE has agreed to arrange for at least 3 flights to bring these Ugandans home and as soon as our Ministry of Health is ready to receive them, this offer will be utilized. Fortunately, many of these migrant workers already have air tickets which were provided by their former employers.
8. Finally, the Indian community in Uganda has also proposed to arrange for a special flight to bring back both the Ugandans who are stranded in India and also some members of the Indian community who hold Ugandan resident permits but got stranded while visiting India. We are examining this proposal.

Hon. Members, I wish to clarify that by allowing Ugandans to return home,
Government is not re-opening the international airport to

‘regular passenger flights’ because the risk of imported cases is perhaps even higher now than before.

Government will therefore permit Ugandans to return only on specially arranged flights which will be cleared for that purpose.

All the returning travelers will be required to meet the cost of their own travel back home as has been the international practice for many countries. We have since established that many of our returnees already had air tickets which they were traveling on at the time of the closure and that they would now simply need to update those tickets with the airlines.

The travelers will be required to provide proof of negative COVID-19 test results before they embark on their journey. This will help to avoid infecting each other while in transit and on the plane. You may also wish to know that each country has instituted specific testing requirement prior to international travel. In the United Kingdom a passenger must test for COVID-19 at least 10 days before they can travel while in the UAE it is 6 days in advance of travel.

As for those who test positive to COVID-19, they will first have to undergo treatment in their present locations before they can travel back to Uganda at a later date.

On arrival in Uganda, the returnees will again be tested for COVID-19 and then taken into mandatory quarantine for a minimum of 14 days in a Government designated facility.

The Ministry of Health will ensure that by the time they are released into the communities, they will have been certified as healthy.

This exercise of returning our nationals will focus only on those who got stranded abroad due to the closure of the airport and the borders.

Hon. Members you will recall the recent situation in China where we got several distress calls from some Ugandans who were being thrown out of their houses and denied services mostly because the Chinese local authorities had become very strict on testing for COVID- 19 before anyone could access basic services.

We clearly remember the loud calls for their evacuation which of course we did not hurry to do.

However, I wish to report that through our diplomatic intervention with the Chinese Government, we were able to secure some reprieve for these Ugandans and the feedback that we are getting from them now, is that they are very relieved and going about their business as usual.

Additionally, we have agreed with the Chinese government that this reprieve will continue to last at least throughout this period of the pandemic.

You will also recall the issue of our students in Wuhan and the desperate calls by their relatives for evacuation. The fact is that these student's problem was not necessarily about them returning home but the rising cost of living during the lockdown and the understandable fear of contracting the disease.

Government then took the bold and wise decision not to evacuate them but to provide a small financial package that has sustained them to this point.

Hon. Members the feedback from these students in Wuhan is that none of them contracted COVID-19 and they are all safe and have resumed their studies. We therefore consider this matter successfully resolved.

We will therefore continue to work closely with the Ministry of Education and Sports to monitor the situation of all our students abroad and to give them all the consular support that they may need.

Additionally, I wish to call on the parents and guardians of the students and especially those who are privately sponsored, to provide them with adequate moral and financial support during this very difficult time.

Honorable Members, I must re-emphasize that for us to succeed in safely returning our nationals who are stranded abroad, we need to prepare adequately for this exercise.

In this regard, I will request Honorable Members to fully support the Ministry of Health, the other frontline agencies and my Ministry to arrange for an orderly and safe return for every Ugandan who is stranded abroad.

Madame Speaker and Hon. Members of the House I wish to conclude by first thanking all the Ugandans who are stranded abroad and their families for being very patient, just like all our people at home have been, as Government deals with this very difficult and unprecedented situation.

Additionally, I wish to say that Government is fully committed to ensuring the welfare and safety of all Ugandans both at home and abroad and will continue to act both rationally and responsibly with regard to this pandemic.

All Government interventions in the fight against COVID-19 are being made after careful analysis and in the best interest of the country as a whole.

I thank you