

Election measures disrupt cancer care, hospital access

UGANDA'S OLD VOICE

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As the country voted, patients battling chronic illnesses found themselves cut off from care by internet blackouts, cash shortages and stalled transport.

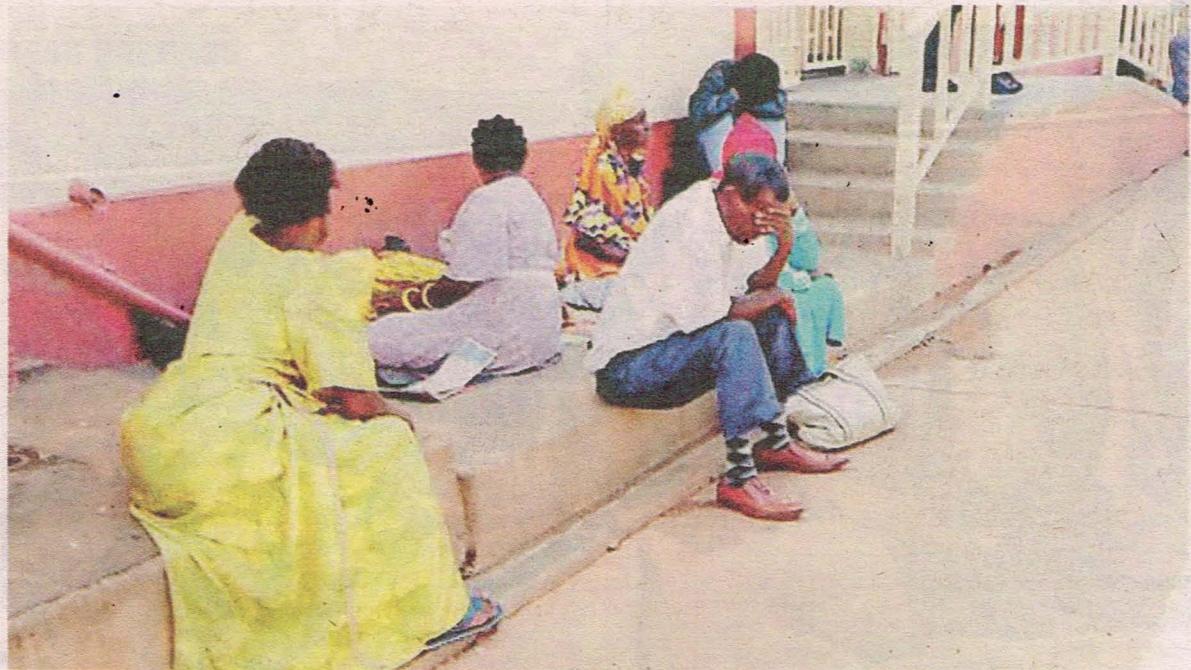
BY TONNY ABET

The recently concluded presidential and parliamentary elections brought significant disruptions to daily life in a country heavily reliant on a cash-based economy, mobile money, and public transport.

In the days leading up to and during the election period, authorities imposed a nationwide internet shutdown, citing security concerns. Public transport, particularly long-distance bus companies that ferry patients to Kampala (home to major facilities such as the Uganda Cancer Institute and other national referral hospitals), has been largely suspended due to safety fears.

These combined disruptions, including internet and mobile money (cash withdrawal) issues, halted transportation, and challenges accessing cash, created barriers to healthcare access, especially for vulnerable groups.

Patients with chronic conditions such as cancer, who often require periodic check-ups, treatments, scans, or medications, faced particular hardships. Many rely on family remittances via mobile money to cover basic needs



Cancer patients and their caretakers sit outside a ward at the cancer institute in Mulago, Kampala.. PHOTO/FILE

such as food, soap, transport fares, or small out-of-pocket costs for diagnostics like X-rays.

Mr Moses Echodu, the executive director of the Uganda Child Cancer Foundation (UCCF), an organisation supporting children with cancer, observed a noticeable drop in outpatient attendance during this period compared to normal days.

"Patients who were already admitted or within the hospital received care because nurses, lab technicians, and pharmacists remained available every day," Mr Echodu explained.

"However, outpatients trickled in very small numbers. There's always an impact when such disruptions occur. The question now is how we rapidly support those patients when they return—perhaps on Monday or later," he added.

Mr Echodu emphasised the critical role of mobile money for cancer pa-

tients and families, who frequently receive funds from relatives and friends to afford essentials and treatment-related expenses.

"While we understand security concerns, decisions like these must fac-

tor in patients facing life-or-death situations daily. Considerations should extend beyond just the internet to include mobile money, transport, and access to basic funds," he added.

A senior doctor at the Uganda Cancer Institute (UCI), who preferred to remain anonymous due to concerns about job repercussions, acknowledged the broader effects. "Of course, the disruptions affect services. Internet shutdowns impact everything—even people can die from delayed care. So many things are involved. But you speak to the Executive Director (ED) because these days when you speak, people think you this..." the doctor said.

However, Dr Jackson Orem, the UCI executive director, offered a more measured view. "Not that much, because the doctors were there, and I think patients must have prepared themselves for election time. There was no breakdown in service delivery," he said.

BACKGROUND

Cancer survival rate in Uganda remains low, at around 20 percent, according to the Ministry of Health. According to the Health Sector performance report, there were 51,718 deaths in health facilities in the 2024/2025 financial year, a seven percentage point increase from the 47,991 deaths in the 2023/2024 financial year, according to the new 2025 report.