



Cars wade through traffic in Kampala. According to police, motor vehicle theft is among the major forms of cross-border crime in East Africa. PHOTO/ FILE

Drug trafficking, vehicle theft dominate cross-border cases

Vehicle theft is often linked to organised crime syndicates that dismantle stolen vehicles for parts or resell them in foreign markets.

BY YAHUDU KITUNZI

Cross-border crime continues to pose a serious challenge to international security and cooperation. In 2024, Interpol (the International Criminal Police Organisation) intensified its operations against transnational threats, with particular focus on drug trafficking and motor vehicle theft. These crimes not only undermine national stability but also disrupt economies and communities across borders.

The Police Crime Report 2024 highlights the scale of these challenges and the successes achieved through coordinated international action. Drug trafficking remains one of the most pressing global security concerns. According to the report, Interpol intercepted traffickers on seven occasions. This involved two cocaine cases, two methamphetamine cases, and one opium case.

Eight suspects—five men and three women—were arrested and charged in court. Judicial outcomes included four suspects fined between Shs10m and Shs20m. One case was dismissed, with another still pending trial.

The operations, the crime report notes, underscore Interpol's growing role in dismantling transnational drug networks. The arrests highlight, adds the report, the importance of intelligence sharing and coordinated enforcement in curbing the flow of illicit substances across borders.

According to the report, motor vehicle theft is another major form of

cross-border crime. In 2024, Interpol handled 54 cases. These involved 48 motor vehicles, five motorcycles, and one tricycle. Out of these, 21 vehicles were successfully recovered, all within Uganda. This recovery rate demonstrates the effectiveness of regional cooperation and Interpol's verification systems.

Vehicle theft is often linked to organised crime syndicates that dismantle stolen vehicles for parts or resell them in foreign markets. The recoveries in Uganda highlight both the country's vulnerability to cross-border theft and its growing capacity to respond through collaboration with Interpol.

Beyond direct enforcement, Interpol issued 97 Red Notices in 2024, declar-

ing 110 suspects wanted. This marked a reduction compared to 182 suspects declared wanted in 2023, reflecting improved precision in targeting fugitives and stronger collaboration among member states.

The 2024 report illustrates Interpol's pivotal role in safeguarding international relations by tackling two major forms of cross-border crime: drug trafficking and motor vehicle theft. With seven drug interceptions, eight suspects prosecuted, and 54 vehicle theft cases investigated, Interpol demonstrated its capacity to disrupt criminal networks operating across borders.

By strengthening cooperation among member states, Interpol continues to reinforce global security, ensuring that

crime across borders is met with coordinated justice and effective enforcement.

On the rise...

Notwithstanding, Mr David Wanyama, cross-border specialist, said vehicle theft and drug trafficking are significant and interconnected transnational organised crimes in Uganda and the wider East African region. He explained that criminal syndicates often link these activities, using stolen vehicles to transport drugs and other illicit goods across porous borders.

"Uganda is both a source, transit point, and destination for stolen vehicles," Mr Wanyama noted, highlighting the scale of the challenge.

SIDEBAR

Car theft: What to, and what not to do

According to police and experts, when your car is stolen, you should do the following immediately:

1. Don't panic after discovering that your car has been stolen. Confirm the vehicle was stolen. Confirm that the car was not towed due to illegal parking or moved by a family member. Check with nearby security personnel or parking management.
2. Report immediately to any

nearby police station. Provide key details, including the vehicle registration number, chassis number, engine number, colour, make, model, and any distinguishing features. Request a police reference number for follow-up.

3. Notify your insurance company. If the vehicle is insured, inform your insurer immediately and submit the required documentation, including the police report. Delays can affect claim processing timelines.
4. Alert tracking company (if installed). If the vehicle has a tracking device, contact the tracking service provider immediately so they

can attempt real-time location and immobilisation.

5. Inform your bank or financier. If the vehicle is under loan financing, notify the bank or leasing company to avoid contractual complications.
6. Spread verified information responsibly. Share accurate vehicle details on trusted community platforms and social media, but avoid sharing sensitive personal data that could expose you to fraud.
7. Follow up consistently. Maintain communication with the police and your insurer. Keep copies of all documents and record reference numbers.

Syndicates typically target popular models such as Land Cruisers and Super Customs, among others. Vehicles stolen in Uganda are frequently smuggled into neighbouring countries, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), South Sudan, Rwanda, and Kenya.

Mr Fred Egesa, a security analyst, noted that cross-border crime has long existed in the region. He explained that vehicles are sometimes stolen from Kenya and brought into Uganda, facilitated by individuals who specialise in transnational crime.

"Unfortunately, many of these criminals are connected to security structures in different countries. They build networks that operate like agents—when you rob from one side, you are protected on the other," Mr Egesa said.

He stressed that such crimes cannot thrive without the involvement of corrupt officers. Some security officials, including high-ranking ones, are—per Mr Egesa's allegations—compromised and benefit directly from these networks.

"You find big officers behind these crimes. These criminals have godfathers who protect them, making arrests extremely difficult," he added.

According to the security analyst, cross-border crimes are on the rise, fuelled by collusion between criminals, certain security officials, and even politicians. Intelligence efforts are often undermined because some officers deliberately suppress information to protect their own interests.

Mr Wilfred Mwendu, a businessman operating in Uganda and Kenya, explained that criminals employ several methods to move stolen vehicles across borders. These include bribing officials at formal checkpoints and dismantling vehicles to transport parts separately for later reassembly.

"Stolen vehicles serve as a key asset for drug trafficking, providing untraceable transportation for narcotics," Mr Mwendu emphasised, adding that Uganda's porous borders and cash-based economy facilitate corruption, making it easier for smugglers to evade law enforcement.

Mr Mwendu said once a vehicle is stolen, criminals either strip it for parts or disguise it with fake number plates and fresh paint before sending it across the border. "A truck full of spare parts can cross borders with forged importation documents, and immigration and customs officials are sometimes involved in shifting them across," Mr Mwendu revealed.

Mr Wanyama said once across the border, stolen vehicle parts are openly sold in local markets. In Kenya, they are traded in Nairobi's Kariobangi area; in Uganda, in Katwe, Kampala; and in Tanzania, at Gerezani in Dar es Salaam. From Tanzania and Uganda, some of these spare parts are further transported into the DRC and Burundi.

Police urges calm

Mr Rusoke Kituuma, the police spokesman in Uganda, insists that stolen vehicles are usually recovered through Interpol coordination.

"Once an item is stolen from one country and ends up in another, we rely on cooperation under the Interpol framework to pursue and recover it. That system is helping us retrieve stolen property, as countries work together and support each other," Mr Kituuma said.

The police spokesperson noted that, while cross-border cases exist, they are not always alarming. The police spokesperson advised individuals who lose property and suspect it has been taken across the border to report immediately to Interpol for swift action.