

Ugandans breath world's dirtiest air

Uganda ranked 8th most polluted country globally

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KAMPALA — In the early hours of the morning, before traffic thickens and the city fully wakes up, Kampala's air can feel deceptively calm. But as the day unfolds, engines revving, dust rising, waste burning in the distance, that calm gives way to something heavier, harder to ignore.

It's not just a feeling. It's measurable.

A new global assessment has placed Kampala among the most polluted cities in the world, raising fresh concerns about what residents are breathing in every single day, and what it could mean for their health in the years ahead.

According to the 2025 World Air Quality Report by IQAir, Uganda is now ranked the eighth most polluted country globally and the third most polluted in Africa. Kampala, the country's economic and administrative hub, ranks as the 10th most polluted capital city in the world.

At the centre of these rankings is a metric few people encounter in everyday life, but one that has profound consequences: PM_{2.5}.

These are microscopic particles in the air, so small they are about 30 times thinner than a human hair. Because of their size, they don't just settle in the nose or throat; they travel deep into the lungs and can even enter the bloodstream.

The report found that Uganda's average annual PM_{2.5} level stands at 43 micrograms per cubic metre. The World Health Organization recommends a safe level of just 5.

Put simply, the air Ugandans are breathing contains nearly nine times more harmful particles than what is considered safe.

And Kampala, with its dense traffic, rapid urbanisation, and expanding industrial activity, sits at the heart of that exposure.

The data behind these findings is extensive. IQAir compiled information from more than 40,000 monitoring



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stations across 9,446 cities in 143 countries, using a method that weighs pollution levels against where people actually live. In Uganda's case, however, much of that data comes from non-governmental monitoring systems, highlighting a gap in official infrastructure.

But beyond the numbers, the consequences are already unfolding in clinics and communities.

"Air pollution is not just an environmental issue, it is a public health emergency," said Dr Alex Ndyabakira, District Medical Officer for Makindye Division, during a recent air quality training for journalists organised by the Kampala Capital City Authority.

Globally, air pollution is linked to around seven million premature deaths every year. In Uganda, it is estimated to contribute to nearly 30,000 deaths

annually, a figure that underscores how deeply the issue is embedded in public health.

Doctors are seeing the effects firsthand. Cases of asthma, pneumonia, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease are rising, particularly in urban areas. Children are especially vulnerable. Exposure to polluted air at a young age can permanently affect lung development, setting the stage for lifelong health complications.

For many residents, though, the crisis doesn't present itself in statistics. It shows up in everyday discomfort.

On Kampala's busy streets, boda boda riders spend hours navigating traffic, often enveloped in exhaust fumes.

"I spend the whole day on the road," said Moses Kigongo, who operates in the city centre. "By evening, my chest feels heavy, and sometimes I cough a lot. But what can I do? This is how I earn a living."

In markets, the experience is similar. Sarah Nakimuli, a vendor, pointed to the dust that rises from roads, especially those that remain unpaved or under construction. "Most roads have remained dusty," she said. "We are coughing from morning up to evening."

The causes of Kampala's pollution are both visible and systemic.

Traffic emissions remain one of the biggest contributors. Thousands of vehicles, many ageing, poorly maintained, and lacking modern emission controls, move through the city daily. Their exhaust fumes linger, especially in congested areas.

Open burning of waste adds another layer. Despite official discouragement, it remains common in many parts of the city, releasing harmful particles into the air. Construction activity, industrial emissions, and rapid urban expansion are compounding the problem.

Recognising the scale of the challenge, authorities have begun to respond, though gradually.

One of the most immediate interventions targets vehicle emissions. The government recently announced a ban on mechanically unfit taxis operating in Kampala and surrounding areas. These vehicles, often in poor condition, are known to produce excessive exhaust.

"We don't expect any old taxis in Kampala," said State Minister for Works and Transport Fred Byamukama, during a stakeholder's meeting in Namanve. He described vehicles with "doors tied with ropes" and poor internal conditions as unacceptable.

Enforcement, he added, will be strict, with authorities working alongside police to remove non-compliant vehicles from the road.

While the directive is framed primarily as a road safety measure, its implications for air quality are significant. Fewer poorly maintained vehicles could mean lower emissions, a small but meaningful step in addressing the broader problem.

At the same time, monitoring efforts are expanding.

The Kampala Capital City Authority has installed around 100 air quality monitoring stations across the city and is working to grow that network. Better data, officials say, is essential for understanding the scale of the problem and designing effective responses.

Yet even with these efforts, one challenge persists: awareness.

Compared to other public health threats, air pollution often receives less attention partly because it is invisible, and partly because its effects accumulate over time rather than appearing suddenly.

Dr Ndyabakira believes the media has a critical role to play in changing that.

"By equipping journalists with the right tools, we are investing in informed reporting, strengthened accountability, and long-term positive behavior, change," he said.

For now, the reality remains unchanged.

Every day, millions of people in Kampala step into the same air-breathing in a mix of dust, fumes, and invisible particles that, over time, can shape their health in ways they may not immediately see.

It is a slow-moving crisis. But one that is becoming harder to ignore.

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