



MV Kabalega on the day it sank in May 2005. PHOTO/ FILE

# Parallel probes reveal failure to insure vessels after Kabalega sinks

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BY ISAAC MUFUMBA

Twenty-one years ago, earlier this month, the Marine Vehicle (MV) Kabalega, a wagon ferry operated by the Uganda Railways Corporation (URC), sank in the waters of Lake Victoria, about 150 feet between Kuye Islands and Mazinga Sub-county and Bukasa in Kyamuswa Sub-county in what is known as the Ssesse Islands.

The ferry sank on May 5, 2005, several hours after a collision with MV Kaawa, another ferry operated by URC.

At the time of the collision, MV Kabalega, which was loaded with about 6,800 tonnes of wheat, was headed to Port Bell in Uganda from Tanzania's Lake Victoria Port of Mwanza, while MV Kaawa was headed in the opposite direction.

The bows of both ferries were damaged, but none of the crew was killed in what has since been described as a freak accident.

However, the impact of the collision was heavier on MV Kabalega, as all the railway wagons on its deck were sent plunging into the water.

MV Kabalega's buoyancy tank was also heavily damaged, allowing water to rapidly flow into it. That was identified as the reason why it sank.

## Parliamentary probe

Following the accident, Mr John Byabagambi, the chairperson of the Parliamentary Committee on Works and Transport, an-

nounced on May 20, 2005, that Parliament was to investigate the circumstances under which the collision occurred.

Mr Byabagambi, who was also the Member of Parliament representing Ibanda South in the 7th Parliament, announced that he had drafted the terms of reference under which Parliament would investigate the management of URC.

The probe by the parliamentary committee, Mr Byabagambi said, was set to commence on Monday, May 23, 2005.

However, moments after Mr Byabagambi made the announcement, then minister of Works, Mr John Nasasira, announced that he would set up a Judicial Commission of Inquiry into the collision and subsequent sinking of MV Kabalega.

Mr Byabagambi said his committee would exercise its mandate despite the decision of the minister to set up a parallel investigation.

## No qualifications

MPs on the committee heard that Mr Stephen Kaliisa, the Third Officer who was in charge of the MV Kaawa at the time of the collision, had no qualifications or training in marine activities.

The revelation was first made by the First Officer of the said ferry, Mr Samuel Kyabukulu, while appearing before the committee on May 24, 2005.

Mr Kyabukulu said Mr Kaliisa was not qualified to steer the vehicle. Mr Kaliisa admitted that he was indeed not qualified.

"I was appointed a cadet in 1999, but I have never gone for professional marine training. After my Senior Six studies in Ibanda, I wanted to develop a career in marine services. I joined the Uganda Railways Corporation, and in 1993, I was appointed a sailor and got on-the-job training until 1999. In March 2002, when the corporation was phasing out cadets, I was appointed third officer in charge of Kaawa," Mr Kaliisa told the MPs.

Captain Albert Ocaya, who was the chief of MV Kaawa, told MPs that he had only been in charge of the ferry for two months, having earlier served as the Captain of MV Kabalega.

"When I handed over the ship, I did not expect anything strange. I was posted from Kabalega to Kaawa two months ago and had only worked with Kaliisa, who was under training for that short period," Captain Ocaya told the legislators.

## Poor communication

During the course of the probe, Capt Ocaya denied having been asleep at the time of the collision, saying he was "very alert" and "even heard the bang of the two ships".

He instead attributed the collision to poor communication between the officers who were in charge of the two vessels and inadequate training on the part of Mr Kaliisa.

"There was poor communication between the officers of Kaawa and Kabalega. If Kaliisa had notified me about the trouble, the accident would have been averted. The navigation lights and one of the radars for steering were missing," he said.

Mr Kaliisa, however, insisted that the collision would have been avoided if all the vessels had the appropriate lighting facilities.

"With the training I had, I was confident that by adjusting, I would pass Kabalega by use of the red light as we had earlier agreed. Kaawa lacked the green light used for crossing, but for a long time, we used to cross without it," Mr Kaliisa said.

## Ministerial probe commences

While Mr Byabagambi said the committee would exercise its mandate to establish why it sank, Mr Nasasira unveiled a seven-man team to probe the collision of the two vehicles.

The team headed by former Attorney General Bart Katureebe, was unveiled on July 26, 2005.

"I have set up an inquiry team in accord-

ance with the Commission of Inquiry Act, Cap 166. It will sit at Kyambogo, will be open and will start work on June 1 (2005). The commission will assess the seaworthiness of Kabalega and Kaawa in terms of technical conditions before the vessels collided, to include manning levels of the two ferries, communication facilities on board, offshore and stability conditions," Mr Nasasira said.

Mr Nasasira said the investigation would include "assessment of the watch keeping arrangement on board of the two vessels before the accident", adding that the methodology would include interviewing the crew of the different ferries and reviewing, among other things, the status of insurance of ferries, the qualification of personnel and possible training needs.

The minister also announced that he was setting up a task force to plan and manage post-accident decisions and actions. The task force, comprised of, among others, Prof Peter Kasenene and Mr Paul Etiang, would be under his office.

"The task force shall ensure that the Kaawa accident damage is repaired, the necessary installations and repairs required to re-equip MV Pamba and Kaawa are carried out, and the vessels are insured. They will search and assess the damage for Kabalega, determine cost recovery and decide whether it is economically viable to recover, repair, insure and re-use the vessel," Mr Nasasira said.

## No insurance

During the course of the probe conducted by the Katureebe inquiry, it emerged that URC had not insured all its ferries, including MV Kaawa and MV Kabalega.

URC officials told the Commission that insurance was the responsibility of the board of directors of the Corporation, but the board had, in turn, blamed the failure to insure the vehicles on the ministry, which it accused of failure to release funds.

However, while appearing before the Committee on June 21, 2005, the acting Permanent Secretary of the ministry, Mr Grace Itazi, dismissed the board's claims, saying that since URC was operating the vessels as a commercial venture, it was incumbent upon the corporation to take out insurance policies for its fleet.

"Since URC was self-regulating and operating the ferries on a commercial venture, it was the management to insure the vessels. While computing operational costs, the management should have taken the issue of insurance into consideration," Mr Itazi said.

The Commission also heard that the management of URC had refused to take up several officers extended to it by a Non-Government Organisations (NGO) that was at the time active in the areas of provision and training in emergency rescue services.

While appearing before the Commission at the Ministry of Works Public Training Centre in Kyambogo, Mr Timothy DE Wet, the chief executive officer (CEO) of National Lake Rescue Institute, an NGO, said that the training would have helped improve the safety of the Corporation's fleet and also bolster rescue and emergency services.

The lack of insurance cover meant that URC would single-handedly foot the bills for rehabilitation and recovery of the vehicles.

It also meant that it would have to compensate those whose goods it was ferrying. The actual amount that it forked out in compensation is, however, not known.