

## Road accidents are now a national crisis

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**The wreckage of the Bishop of Mbale diocese's vehicle after he got an accident on Fort Portal road on Tuesday, February 16**

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The news of the death of the Rt.Rev. Bishop Patrick Kyaligonza, in a car accident on the road from Fort Portal to Kampala is very sad.

When I last saw him, he was the dean of St John's Cathedral, Kabarole and from all accounts, he was a very inspirational minister to the people of Rwenzori Diocese, and a servant leader to the entire population of Toro. He was elected and consecrated bishop a year ago. He will be sadly missed for a long time. He leaves behind a widow, who was injured in the same accident and three young children, not to mention his parents. My heart cries out: "Lord, have mercy upon us."

But, this event serves to remind me of the long list of friends whom I have lost in the last few years on the same road, by what seems to have become a regular cause of death on the road to Fort Portal. Cars overturn regularly on the highway; and friends have been frequently run over on the roadside pavements, would no longer appear to qualify as accidental events.

My friend, Bajenja, a longstanding elder and chairman of the Toro Land Board, founder of the Fort Portal public library, member of the choir at St John's Cathedral, died in a car accident on this highway.

Prof Ephraim Akiiki Mujaju, former dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences at Makerere University and outstanding political science scholar, died in a car accident near Mubende on the road to Fort Portal.

The Rev. Father Albert Byaruhanga, prominent spiritual counsellor to the people of Toro, priest and minister in the Catholic Church, founder of the Mountains of the Moon University, and presidential advisor, died on the road to Fort Portal from Kampala.

My friend, Rwamuhumbu, a former gombolola (county) chief and wonderful community mobiliser in Fort Portal, was run over and killed by a car as he walked home at Kitumba, on the same road to Fort

Portal.

My brother's son, Mujuni, was killed in a car accident at Mpanga market, on this road.

My cousin's son, Kato, was run over and killed by a car as he walked on the pavement at Kyenjojo, on a Sunday morning.

All these events have had a traumatic impact on families and the community of Toro in ways that are yet to be assessed.

What is all this about? Why should there be such a heavy toll of life on the road from Kampala to Fort Portal? Is this series of fatalities, on one of the major highways of Uganda, a special case affecting only my friends and people relating to our part of Uganda? Or is it a symptom of what may be a national crisis that has not yet been appreciated by the population and those who have the authority to change the situation?

Are fatal "accidents" not preventable? Do we have to suffer so much loss and grief, before we begin to put in place measures that could improve the management of traffic, quality of use of vehicles and highways of Uganda?

Can we stand the growing number of orphans, widows, and loss of active and productive members of our society, on account of an inadequate state of highways, mechanically deficient vehicles, poorly controlled traffic and unqualified driving?

I find it necessary to ask the reader: Are you as affected as I have been by events like this along the road to your home district?

If so, please join me in crying to the Lord: "Lord, hear our prayer."

What can we do to ensure that this kind of death toll along the highways of Uganda is reduced to a minimum, if not eliminated?

One tendency I have observed, in the reporting of these events, is to attempt to explain them, as if each of them was unique.

The reporters tend to attribute the accident to what was observed on the spot: a tyre burst, the car zigzagged, the passengers acted in a certain way, or a boda boda crossed the road. While these on-the-spot details may be true, and may be relevant to the Police follow up, they do not help us appreciate the broad systemic factors that need to be examined and rectified, to resolve this national crisis.

It is evident that those who are planners and managers of the infrastructure of highways and roads network in Uganda, may not yet have taken this crisis on the roads to be their responsibility.

While the population of Uganda has grown five-fold in the last three decades, the road network of Uganda has not grown proportionately.

While the number of vehicles on the roads may have grown considerably, the mechanical quality of the vehicles is unacceptable. The deliberate importation of second-hand or used vehicles, that may not be acceptable elsewhere, has compounded their reliability in a situation where maintenance standards are questionable.

The inspectorate and licensing of vehicles, as well as the training and licensing of drivers, leave much to be desired.

Any visitor to Uganda cannot but be perplexed by the flow, and quality of administration of traffic on our roads, even outside the chaos of Kampala.

The hostile relation between the traffic police and road users is phenomenal.

The unnecessarily high death toll of prominent Ugandans on the roads should be considered a wake-up call to all of us, and to the managers of our national estate.

There is need to re-design the highways to match the development needs of a growing economy. It is not enough to import a large number of vehicles; they must be mechanically sound and maintained. The training and licensing of drivers needs to be standardised.

My prayer is that as we mourn the death of our dear ones on our roads, policy makers and traffic managers would be guided and inspired to design a better system of traffic flow to minimise road-accidents.

This article can be found on-line at: <http://www.newvision.co.ug/D/8/459/710432>

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