



Uganda Railways Corporation

Uganda Railways Corporation's evolution from the colonial days

The incidents for which the building of the railway may be most noted are the killings of a number of construction workers in 1898. These were the days of the Tsavo man eating lions and the railways construction workers were the most victims affected.

Before we all came to know it as Uganda Railways Corporation, this government parastatal used to be called Uganda Railways during the reign of the white man. Built during the Scramble for Africa, the Uganda Railway was the one genuinely strategic railway to be constructed in tropical Africa at that time.

Before the railway's construction, the British East Africa Company had begun the Mackinnon-Sclater road, a 600-mile ox-cart track from Mombasa to Busia in Kenya, in 1890.

With steam-powered access to Uganda, the British could transport people and soldiers to ensure their domination of the African Great Lakes region.

The Uganda Railway was named after its ultimate destination. Construction began at the port city of Mombasa in British East Africa in 1896 and finished at the line's terminus, Kisumu, on the eastern shore of Lake Victoria, in 1901.

The railway was a huge logistical achievement and became strategically and economically vital for both Uganda and Kenya. It helped to suppress slavery, by removing the need for humans in the transport of goods.

In August 1895, a Bill was passed at Westminster in Britain authorizing the construction of a railway from Mombasa to the shores of Lake Victoria. The man tasked with building the railway was George Whitehouse, an experienced civil engineer who had worked across the British Empire. Whitehouse acted as the Chief Engineer between 1895 and 1903, also serving as the Railway's manager from its opening in 1901.

East African Railways takes over

The East African Railways and Harbors Corporation (EAR&H) is a defunct company that operated railways and harbors in East Africa from 1948 to 1977. It was formed in 1948 for the new East African High Commission by merging the Kenya and Uganda Railways and Harbors with the Tanganyika Railway of the Tanganyika Territory. As well as running railways and harbors in the three territories it ran inland



CHARLES A. KATEEBA
Managing Director, Uganda Railways Corporation

shipping services on Lake Victoria, Lake Kyoga, Lake Albert, the Victoria Nile and the Albert Nile. In 1955 and 1956 EAR&H introduced new and much more powerful steam locomotives for its Kenya and Uganda network: the 59 class Garratts. These were the mainstay of the section's heaviest traffic until they started to be withdrawn from service between 1973 and 1980.

EAR&H extended the Uganda Railway from Kampala to Kasese in 1956 and thence to Arua in 1964. In 1962 it completed the northern Uganda railway from Tororo to Pakwach, thus superseding the Victoria Nile steamer service.

In 1977 the High Commission's successor, the East African Community, was dissolved and EAR&H's rail network was broken up into three national railways: Kenya Railways Corporation, Tanzania Railways Corporation and Uganda Railways Corporation and this is how Uganda Railways Corporation came into existence.

After a series of failure to deliver by the new Uganda Railways Corporation, following the collapse of the Kampala-Kasese route closure by government of Uganda to hand over operations and running of URC to another private entity.

Rise and fall of Rift Valley Railways.

Starting November 2006, the operations of URC were privatized by a way of a 25-year concession to Rift Valley Railways Uganda Ltd (RVR) to increase efficiency and service delivery. Under the new arrangement, the mandate of URC was

to undertake railway asset holding, concession monitoring, affording technical support to government on railway policy, regulation and development matters.

The concession gave rift RVRU exclusive rights to offer railway freight services on the entire network of 1250km. however, only a total of 335 (27%) of the rail network was taken over by RVRU: the main line of Kampala-Malaba (250km), Kampala-Nalukolongo (6km), Kampala – Port Bell (9km), Tororo – Mbale (55km) and Jinja – Kakira (15km).

According to Geoffrey Obara, an official from Uganda Railways Corporation, RVRU was obliged to offer marine services on Lake Victoria. However, based on URC's mandate to monitor and evaluate compliance of the concessionaire and their obligations, RVRU's performance up to the time of the first and second restructuring in August 2010 and in 2014 remained very poor.

"The performance of RVRU after both restructuring remained marginally satisfactory as evidenced by insignificant changes in freight volumes and increasing backlog in asset maintenance leading to poor asset availability and productivity." Obara added.

Even with an injection of over USD 120 million dollars in Uganda, RVRU achieved on average 140.5m Net Ton Kilometer (NTK) per year. In the 11th year, the anticipated concession growth of freight volume was 608 million NTK if the concessionaire had performed according to the original concession agreement.

The overall RVRU's performance was still below the base line of 217.3 million NTK set in 2006 for monitoring of the concessionaire's performance and only achieved 23.1% of the set target of financial year 2016/17.

Obara added that after receiving advice from the Attorney General, on 25th January 2018, the Minister of Finance wrote to Rift Valley Railways directing Uganda Railways Corporation to immediately take over all conceded assets.

This was done to forestall further losses to the railway sector and the national economy.

Given the poor state of the main line, there were frequent derailments leading to imposition of numerous temporary speed restrictions reducing the average speed to less than 30Km per hour and therefore increasing transit times to deliver cargo.