

# URC reviving Uganda's old track

By Edward Kayiwa

**A**fter successfully taking over management of the conceded assets of Uganda's Railway network from the Rift Valley Railways (RVR), the Uganda Railways Corporation has now laid an ambitious plan to revive business on the tracks.

The Government-owned enterprise, according to officials, has already drafted a sh333.59b business plan to rehabilitate and purchase key components of the railway network, in order to fully resume operations.

Business on the tracks had gone silent for months, following administrative and technical difficulties the concessioners, RVR had faced before they were terminated.

## Routes revived

Since taking over, however, URC has revived the southern route through Port Bell, Mwanza to Dar es Salam, which had been silent for more than 10 years, bringing business with Tanzania to its knees.

Statistics indicate that the once vibrant business, carrying about 30% of Uganda's business had reduced to less than 3% during the decade-long slumber.

According to Geoffrey Obora, the URC chief civil engineer, the MV Kaawa is fit and already plying the route after rehabilitation, with plans to rehabilitate the MV Pamba underway.

Obora said the plans are underway to also rehabilitate more wagons and coaches, as well as procure others from China to stabilise their operations.

"Currently, cargo and passenger operations have resumed, with 20 passenger coaches plying the Kampala-Namanve route on a daily basis. Later, Luzira and Kyengera services will resume which will move a combined 3,600 people between Kampala and its outskirts every day in four routes," he said.

Records from the finance ministry indicate the country suffered an estimated loss of sh2.824 trillion in damaged assets during the reign of the RVR.

According to Obora, the unattended track led to vandalism of the sleepers, fittings, loop lines and rails. The locomotives also deteriorated, necessitating rehabilitation.

## Planned renovation works

According to Obora, a section of the Jinja pier line, running from the station to the port was vandalised, bringing train services to a stop. However, plans for its sh5b revival this financial year, are in advanced stages, to ensure that Mwanza-Jinja port services are resumed.

Obora said renovation of the Jinja port area will cost about sh2b, and once complete, the facility will have a repair yard for ships and a training facility for marine personnel.

In the short to medium term, Obora said URC intends to repair the ware houses at Port Bell in Luzira, to facilitate storage of commodities from train wagons, to allow them quick turnaround time.



Passengers aboard a Kampala-bound train recently. URC wants to purchase more passenger wagons

## Background

The Uganda Railway, also known as the Lunatic Express, was built by the British colonialists under the foreign office. Works on the line started at Mombasa port in the Kenya colony in 1896 and reached Kisumu, on the eastern shores of Lake Victoria, in 1901.

In 1931, the line reached Kampala. Although most of the line was in present day Kenya, the original purpose of the project was to provide a modern link to transport raw materials out of, and manufactured British goods into Uganda.

On the Ugandan side, the railway line covers 190km, from Kampala to the Kenyan border, and 9km between Kampala and Port Bell. From Kampala, it continues to Kasese in western Uganda, and Pakwach, making it approximately 1,918km from Mombasa in Kenya.

The facility will also be fenced off and gazetted as a customs controlled area to facilitate faster clearance of cargo to and from Tanzania.

"We also have to do some good work on the links pan and deepen the waters around the port, because it has been long since dredging was last done. Later, we shall make the facility suitable for passengers and cargo to dock comfortably, as Bukasa also gets developed to majorly handle cargo," he said.

He said URC spent \$10m on rehabilitation of the Kampala Port Bell rail line, two locomotives and



The Nalukolongo workshop that government plans to refurbish

remanufacturing five diesel electric locomotives to ply the route.

Budget estimates indicate that the railway operator will spend sh1.2b on building warehouses, access roads and fencing Port Bell, while dredging will most likely take sh2b. "The fenders will cost sh1.5b," Obora added.

According to Charles Ochaki, URC's chief operations officer, one of the organisation's immediate plans is to renovate Nalukolongo workshop and the Kampala goods shade, currently in bad shape.

A recent visit to the railway goods shade on Entebbe road revealed the extent of the damage left behind by the RVR.

The once beautiful structures are now dilapidated, with no roof, and the walls are deeply cracked. In some places, the walls have partly fallen and expensive equipment lay outside in a sorry state.

In the compound lies the rich stalker (large fork lift), courted

by rust and years of dilapidation, which according to Ochaki will take sh900m to revive.

He said because RVR did not have a procurement plan for spare parts, they mainly cannibalised on available parts to repair what had broken down, killing the rolling stock and tracks.

Within the next five years, the corporation will have to spend billions to replace it and procure another six locomotives at an estimated cost of sh59.4b and make repairs worth sh36b.

"We also have to purchase flatbed wagons at an estimate of sh75b, rehabilitate 26 covered wagons at sh26b and rehabilitate another 50 covered wagons at sh2.9b," he said.

Additionally, Ochaki said URC plans to give key railway stations across the country a modern face lift at an estimated cost of sh3b.

Charles Kateeba, the URC chief executive, said the European Union has promised to provide a Euro23m

(sh102.95b) credit facility for the resumption of the Tororo-Pakwach line. Making minor repairs on the line and balancing it to facilitate smooth train movement will cost approximately sh20b.

He said the railway line, which today remains in a sorry state, is expected to boost trade between Uganda and its neighbours South Sudan and DR Congo.

This is expected to revive growth of factories and roll out of new technologies to increase agricultural production in the northern region.

"The line is still there, but it has not been used in a long time. So it is not in good shape. We need to stabilise it so that the locomotives can move faster and handle heavy cargo," he said. The line forming the Busoga loop, that is, between Busembatya, Namwendwa, Namasagali and Jinja, will also be rehabilitated at sh20.3b.

Kateeba said the planned new railway network is more comprehensive, stretching to all border towns to facilitate trade and movement of persons.

## New railway

Under the plan, sections of the railway network will be upgraded to the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), while others will be maintained under the meter gauge.

The SGR will go over Malaba-Kampala, then Tororo-Gulu - Nimule before crossing between Gulu-Pakwach - Arua. Another arm will crisscross between Kampala to Kasese and eventually into Democratic Republic of Congo.

Kateeba said the track will branch off from Bihanga to Mbarara, Mirama hills to Kigali.

He said studies have already been done and commercial agreements have been signed for the Malaba-Kampala line and, Tororo to Gulu then to Nimule Juba.