

New Vision: From kiosk

By Michael Kanaabi

Hardly a week after the swearing-in ceremony of President Yoweri Museveni, who had just captured power on January 29, 1986, James Tumusiime was appointed the first Managing Editor of the *New Vision*.

It all started when Abu Mayanja, who was James Tumusiime's colleague on the NRM's external relations committee during the bush war, invited him to his new office in Nakasero, then UTV offices. Mayanja had just been sworn in as information minister a few days earlier and had been tasked to start a government newspaper immediately.

"I was fascinated by the idea and started to reflect on it deeply. Having been at the forefront of the NRA/M's publicity committee as its chairman during the bush war and ran a newspaper called *Uganda Resistance News* during my time in exile in Nairobi, edited *The Dairy Farmers Magazine* and been associated with leading newspapers such as *The Daily Nation* for a long time, I personally felt ready for the task at hand," Tumusiime says.

He immediately headed back to Nairobi where he had left his family, to prepare them to return home. Tumusiime also took time off to break the news to his friends in the media fraternity back in Nairobi and most of them were disappointed he was leaving. Many predicted he would be back in a few months and insisted the uncertainty and instability in Uganda was too much to risk a stable job and comfortable life. But Tumusiime had made up his mind.

With the help of the permanent secretary in the of information ministry, Wilson Wanyama, who knew a number of seasoned journalists from newspapers that had been around, such as *Uganda Times* and *The Mirror*, a team was assembled to start work at *New Vision*.

The premises still inhabited by the company to date, were not in good shape at the time. The buildings had been previously occupied by an Indian company in the cotton export business. The Milton Obote government had taken over the place in the 1980s with plans to start a government newspaper there. Consequently, some equipment including a hot metal type-setting press, a film developer, camera and printer from Russia and operated using Russian were in place. The machine broke down often, but fortunately a technician, Augustine Assimwe, was available to work on it, having trained in Russia.

PIONEER TEAM

The first team Tumusiime assembled to get things up and running at *The New Vision* was made up of Perez Otori, who was the chief sub-editor, Godwin Rwankwenge as head of typesetting, John Asipu a photographer and Mayanja, who was in charge of circulation.

Some of the newspapers in existence at the time according to Tumusiime included *Mummo*, a



Pioneer Editor-in-Chief William Pike (right) and his deputy James Tumusiime

THREE MONTHS AFTER THE PAPER STARTED, WILLIAM PIKE BECAME EDITOR-IN-CHIEF AND MANAGING DIRECTOR

catholic-founded paper that had stood the test of time and was in operation till the mid 1990s, *The Star* and *Ngabo* were Buganda-leaning but with low circulation, *The Citizen* was run by the Democratic Party, while *The Shariat* was Muslim-leaning and radically anti-establishment.

Commentary as a way of delivering the news dominated the papers being published at the time with reporting of hard facts, taking backstage as all papers tried to tow a particular line and twist the news in their favour.

FIRST EDITION

The first edition of *The New Vision* was scheduled to come out early morning of March 18, 1986, but this was not possible despite spending a sleepless night in the newsroom with the team. Reason was the machines broke down so many times. We managed to come out late though but our line minister Abu Mayanja was not impressed as he had hyped the whole affair so much and expected us to deliver on time. With all the machine problems we tried until we found a rhythm that worked and somehow managed to publish the newspaper consistently over time, recalls Tumusiime.

For the first two months, the



Abu Mayanja as the then Minister of Information was tasked with the immediate formation of *The New Vision*

newspaper was a weekly and eventually grew to become a bi-weekly. Five months down the road it became a tri-weekly. "This gave us time to assess the strengths and weaknesses more accurately improving with time," Tumusiime says.

WILLIAM PIKE JOINS TEAM

Three months after the paper went into production, William Pike who became managing director and Editor-in-Chief joined the team. This was a reward for the sacrifice he had made when he chose to give international coverage to the NRA/M during the bush war. He sold their cause and story to the international community.

It was thought that Tumusiime's NRM roots could cloud his objectivity and yet credibility was what the Government needed most.

All these factors worked together to facilitate the appointment of Pike. Tumusiime was consequently appointed his deputy.

Pike and Tumusiime had met briefly in Nairobi and besides his misgivings, the later thought Pike was an intelligent and ambitious journalist.

According to Tumusiime, initially they had a few fights, but got over them quickly as they realised they needed to work together to build the newspaper.

One of their key points of contention centred around Pike

being more interested in directing the newspaper towards analysis and commentary, while Tumusiime was bent on facts.

In another way though, the two personalities complemented each other because through his work with the NRA in the bush, Pike had built a robust network of contacts among the army's top brass. Meanwhile Tumusiime, having been in touch with the rebel outfit's political wing for a long time, had enough high level contacts in government to feed the newspaper with great amounts of information.

Consequently, they combined their energies to build what is today Uganda's largest multi-media company.

CHALLENGES

Besides being programmed in Russian, the printing equipment was faulty and a technician was needed to be on standby to rectify emergencies and ensure a paper was produced.

Reporters, the bulk of whom were inherited from already established and some defunct newspapers, were self-censoring, thanks to the harsh environment they had been operating in throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. The stories they were producing were more of public relations, especially for the Government and not the fair balanced reporting that is the basis of good journalism.

Government, which was still putting structures and institutions in place, also did not have any sources of coordinated information or focal people to deal with. It is only personal contacts and relationships that helped journalists access any worthy news at the time.

The newspaper also lacked vehicles to transport papers upcountry and one of the vehicles a Toyota Hilux pickup given to *The New Vision* by the Government was hijacked by a senior army officer and commander in the north who used it until it was written off. By the time it was retrieved from him after petitioning his superiors consistently, it had almost outlived its usefulness.

Lack of government funding at the start, before the company was designated a parastatal in order for it to access government funds, to operate was also a big challenge. This was a two-year process that started with Cabinet approval and later an act of Parliament. At one point, Tumusiime had to draw his personal savings to pay staff allowances, but this was soon sorted out when the paper's circulation started picking up.

There were many people who thought *The New Vision* was biased in its reporting as it held the Government and its top officials to account.

Whenever a story which was critical of the establishment was published, some big shots in government would issue threats.

Key cases in point include a colonel who had pointed a pistol at someone's wife and a brigadier who had beaten up someone in the city suburb of Kabalagala. These stories though a big hit were not well received by those implicated. During a party, the brigadier asked