



THE REPUBLIC OF UGANDA

MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

**PRESS STATEMENT ON THE ROLE OF THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN
AFFAIRS ON THE RETURN OF UGANDANS STRANDED ABROAD
FOLLOWING THE OUTBREAK OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

BY

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THE OUTBREAK IN WUHAN

1. In December 2019, the World Health Organization China country office confirmed the discovery of a new respiratory pathogen that they named ‘the Novel Coronavirus or N-COV in Wuhan City, Chinese province of HUBEI.
2. By early February 2020, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs begun receiving distress calls from parents of Ugandan students in Wuhan, China who were concerned about the threat of the spreading new disease and the difficulties that their children faced under the lockdown. They demanded evacuation of their children.
3. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, acting through the Embassy in Beijing quickly reached out to the students to provide psychosocial support. Additionally, the ministry initiated consultations within the national taskforce on COVID-19, which agreed to provide financial assistance to the students and not to evacuate them since the latter would expose them to infection. The financial package was delivered through the Embassy and the students have since resumed studies. None of them fell sick.

THE START OF THE PANDEMIC & CLOSURE OF THE AIRPORT AND BORDERS

4. On 11th March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the novel corona virus (COVID-19) a global pandemic and also expressed concern that many countries were not doing much to halt the spread.
5. As a measure to forestall a possible outbreak of COVID-19 in Uganda, His Excellency the President, on Saturday 21st March 2020, announced the immediate closure of Uganda’s international borders and of the international airport in Entebbe, effective midnight on Sunday 22nd March 2020.
6. While these interventions were timely and done in the best interest of the country, they also created a parallel problem whereby several Ugandans who had traveled abroad on short visits for business, medical treatment, tourism and other valid reasons got stranded either in the countries which they were visiting or in transit countries as they traveled back home.
7. The Ministry immediately embarked on registering these stranded persons and by the end of March 2020, we had registered up to 2,392 persons stranded in 66 countries around the world.

OTHER DISTRESSED UGANDANS ABROAD

8. It is important to clarify that there are other Ugandans who have recently fallen into distress abroad as an after effect of the pandemic but are not necessarily stranded.
9. You will recall the various calls for evacuation of Ugandans from Guangdong province where the city of Guangzhou is located after reports of Africans being harassed by the Chinese.
10. My Ministry working closely with other African Governments immediately engaged the Chinese authorities on this matter, which had actually arisen from a miscommunication among the local authorities about how to handle foreign nationals as they control the spread of the corona virus.
11. This matter was quickly resolved through our joint effort and the feedback that we are getting from many of these Ugandans in Guangzhou is that they are not part of the registered 2,392 who consider themselves stranded and asking to be returned home.
12. Many have since gone back to their work and we are grateful to the Chinese government and our African colleagues for managing this problem.

FACILITATING THE RETURN OF THE STRANDED UGANDANS

13. Having registered the stranded persons and also taken note of the fact that the country has now built some considerable capacity to control the spread of the virus, the Ministry recommended to Cabinet to allow the stranded nationals to begin returning home in a phased manner which was subsequently approved.
14. This meant that all the concerned MDAs would have to be ready to receive these returnees. The airport would have to be prepared to comply with WHO and MOH social distancing standards. Testing would have to be done on arrival. Quarantine facilities would have to be prepared and all the frontline workers would have to be well equipped with PPEs.
15. The Ministry recently issued standard guidelines to all Missions on the conduct of the exercise.
16. A work plan has also been developed to allow the return of an average of 300 persons every fortnight and the arrivals have now began on various carriers.

17. The flights are specially arranged by our Embassies abroad for the repatriation exercise and therefore Entebbe airport is not yet open to commercial passenger flights. We are also taking advantage of flights coming into the country to evacuate nationals of other countries. Some of the returnees are also arranging for their own flights, which governments is clearing.
18. As has been the practice globally, the returnees will be required to pay for their own travel back home but fortunately, many of them already had tickets that they were traveling on when they got stranded and they would have to simply renew these tickets or top up if the fees were increased.
19. The process of preparations has been ongoing and now the relevant institutions are ready to start receiving the returnees.
20. Starting this week, we expect to receive flights from Southern Africa with about 70 Ugandans, from the UAE with approximately 200 Ugandans, from Afghanistan with approximately 108 Ugandans, from the USA with about 134 and about 120 from India. Today in particular, we are receiving 32 Ugandans coming in on a flight from Sudan and 16 Ugandans from Belgium and Netherlands. Yesterday we received a flight from Turkey with a few Ugandans. Other flights will soon follow from other regions.
21. Arrangements are being made to start receiving Ugandans for across the land borders and details will be communicated.
22. On behalf of Government, I wish thank all the Ugandans who are stranded abroad and their families for being very patient, as Government deals with this very difficult and unprecedented situation.