



**REPUBLIC OF UGANDA**

**STATEMENT BY HON. BETTY AMONGI ONGOM (MP)  
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REPUBLIC OF UGANDA**

**ON THE VISIT TO THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA**

**FROM**

**23<sup>RD</sup> - 28<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 2022**

Fellow Countrymen and Women,  
Members of the Press,  
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Allow me to welcome you all to this meeting and to inform you that last week, I led a delegation to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). This visit followed one I had to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in December 2021 on matters related to externalization of labour from Uganda to mainly the Middle East.

The main purpose of our visit to Riyadh (KSA) was to:

- a) Assess the status of implementation of the Bilateral Labour Agreement(s) signed between the Government of Uganda and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 2017;
- b) Ensure that the requirements of the Employment (Recruitment of Ugandan Migrant Workers) Regulations, 2021 are being enforced;
- c) Ensure that the Presidential Directives on Externalization of labour are being adhered to; and
- d) Appraise the condition and general welfare of Ugandan Migrant Workers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The Government Delegation comprised of officials from Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, represented by the Ambassador and other officials from our Embassy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Also, with us were representatives of the Uganda Association of External Recruitment Agencies (UAERA), which is the umbrella body to the recruitment agencies in Uganda.

While in Riyadh we held several meetings with:

- ❖ H. E. Ahmed Sulaiman Alrajhi, Minister of Human Resources and Social Development (HRSD), in the company of Dr. Abduallah Abuthnain, Vice Minister for Labour, Abdul Majid Al Rashoudi, Deputy Minister for Labour Affairs, Dr. Adnan Alnuaim Deputy Minister for International Affairs, and other senior officials;
- ❖ Officials of the Republic of Uganda Embassy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia;
- ❖ Categories of Ugandan Migrant Workers, including those in distress and housed by the Embassy at a *Shelter* in Riyadh;
- ❖ Management of selected Saudi Recruitment Agencies.
- ❖ Sakan, a private company contracted by Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to provide accommodation facilities and manage distressed Migrant Workers.hj

You will recall that in December 2017, the two countries signed two Agreements: the Domestic Workers' Recruitment Agreement and the General Workers' Recruitment Agreement to facilitate safe and decent work opportunities and environments for Ugandan Migrant Workers. The Agreements have a number of provisions on obligations and/or responsibilities bestowed upon the Governments, Recruitment Agencies both within Uganda and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and indeed the Migrant Workers, themselves.

As I speak, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a key destination for Ugandan Migrant Workers estimated to be more than 140,000, in different categories across the expansive terrain.

While this programme, if managed to the expectation of all Parties involved, can alleviate the unemployment situation in the country and also bring in remittances that help to improve the livelihoods of our people, challenges exist that necessitated my visits to the major destinations for our young people in the Middle East with a view to finding durable solutions. Estimated annual remittances from Uganda Migrant Workers in the Middle East alone, is estimated to be about USD \$900m per annum. It is obvious that the push and pull factors that underlie movement of our people cannot simply be wished away or decreed. Evidence has shown that if unregulated, this movement degenerates into the vice of human trafficking and its attendant risks.

Therefore, and at the said meetings, a number of issues affecting the welfare of Ugandan Workers in the Kingdom were raised and key amongst these were:

1. Absence of a Joint Technical Committee (JTC) constituted with representation from both Governments to oversee implementation, as envisaged by the framers of the 2017 Agreements. The JTC has never been constituted. During our various discussions, and particularly those with the Government of KSA, we reiterated the urgent need to ensure compliance with and enforcement of the regulatory framework. We undertook to exchange nominations to the JTC before end of February 2022, arrange 2 face-to-face meetings of the Committee, as required in the Agreements, by June and December 2022 and virtual preparatory meetings by March and September 2022. The JTC would be tasked with the responsibility of reviewing and consolidating necessary amendments to the existing Agreements with a view to entrenching rights and safety of Migrant Workers.

2. The need to stem irregular and increasing cases of transfer of Domestic Workers' services from one Sponsor/Employer to another outside the control of Saudi Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development. This makes it difficult to monitor the migrant workers some of whom unsuspectingly find themselves getting into unfavourable and often risky working conditions. These transfers often happen without the knowledge of the two Governments or even the licensed Ugandan Recruitment Companies. Under the existing Agency Service Agreement (i.e. between Uganda and Saudi Recruitment Agencies) such transfers cannot take place without consent of the Parties! When these happen, tracking and monitoring the Migrant Workers becomes difficult and creates room for breach of rights, terms and conditions of service. Some Migrant Workers are either not paid according to the original terms of the contracts they sign, have their travel documents confiscated and at times lost during the process of transfer to other Sponsors/Employers, are denied Exit Visas and/or the right to return home after the two-year contract duration or forced to sign extensions to contracts under unfavourable conditions yet any extension outside the original two-year contract with a new Employer means the Ugandan Recruitment Company loses track of and responsibility for the Worker(s) in question.
3. Reported breaches of terms and conditions in Migrant Workers' contracts and non-enforcement of sanctions on perpetrators cited include:
  - (i) denial of access to adequate medical services by employers;
  - (ii) incomplete and/or non-payment of wages;
  - (iii) Denial of access to telephone, internet and other communication services;
  - (iv) confiscation of the identification documents by some employers and agencies;
  - (v) instances of torture and mistreatment of domestic workers;
  - (vi) cases of denial of proper meals to the domestic workers;
  - (vii) employers falsely branding Migrant Workers as runaway cases or of theft in an attempt to escape responsibility for paying salary, providing return air tickets and other obligations.
4. Other concerns raised for attention by the Saudi Authorities include:

- (i) hardship in acquisition of Exit Visas for Domestic Workers with psychiatric problems, and those who enter Saudi Arabia on Visit Visas or as trafficked persons;
- (ii) hardship in acquisition of Exit Visas and Birth Certificates for babies born to Domestic Workers;
- (iii) cases of death and burial of some of these without family consent conveyed through the Embassy; and
- (iv) need for stronger joint measures to curb the vice of human trafficking, with some Ugandans travelling without assured jobs and being held in rented accommodation (*Biyumba*) for long periods resulting into distress and abuse.

### **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

The above and several other related concerns were candidly brought out during the various meetings we held and the following actions were agreed:

1. There must be strict enforcement of the signed Agreements and Contracts in order to protect the Migrant Workers and also ease the work of the Government in following up cases arising from contractual breach.
2. Accordingly, the Joint Technical Committee (JTC) will be established to thoroughly review and consolidate the existing Agreements before their expiry in December 2022. It is this Committee that will support the two Governments to monitor implementation of and compliance with the Agreements/Contracts to ensure safe and decent labour externalisation.
3. Through the JTC, an elaborate Joint Reporting, Complaints and Case Management System/Procedure should be established.
4. A robust and efficient monitoring system that is linked to the Saudi web-based MUSANED and the upgraded Uganda's External Employment Management Information System (EEMIS) should be established within all the participating Recruitment Companies (Local and Foreign) in order to monitor and account for every Migrant Worker at all times – even when the individual Worker changes from one Recruitment Company or Sponsor/Employer to another.
5. In accordance with existing Regulations, the pre-departure orientation and/or training of Migrant Workers will be reviewed further to entrench content on issues of the Workers' human and other contractual rights,

culture, technology used at work, vital travel knowledge and requirements, person specifications for preferred categories of Workers etc.

6. For effective monitoring and follow up of deployed Migrant Workers, there will be:
  - a. Periodic (quarterly) status reports on each deployed Worker submitted online and in copy to the Embassy by the Saudi Recruitment Agency and to the Ministry by the Ugandan Recruitment Companies.
  - b. Each Saudi Arabian Recruitment Agency must employ a Ugandan Coordinator/Translator to handle the complaints or distress calls raised by the Migrant Workers. The Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development will design an appropriate curriculum for, train and regularly engage with these Coordinators/Translators as well as other key players on the New Regulations and functionality of the EEMIS.
7. All work processes being handled using the EEMIS, including clearance of other categories of Workers beyond the Domestic Migrant Workers, will be reviewed further for better monitoring, data capture, online payments, license processing, training and complaints and distress reporting. The role of Embassies in the registration and sanctioning of errant Recruitment Agencies in countries of destination will also be redefined and strengthened. The Directive by Cabinet to deploy Labour Attaches at our Embassies to focus specifically on labour externalization issues will be implemented. The Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development will be asked to avail resources to both the Embassies (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development for effective coordination, supervision, monitoring and prompt response.
8. The Ministry is following up all reported cases of abuse and non-compliance with contractual obligations and in addition to imposition of strict sanctions against companies/individuals involved in violation of the rights of Migrant Workers will also re-engage with the financial institutions with which Recruitment Agencies execute Bank Guarantees to ensure that where necessary these are liquidated to make good of omissions.
9. The Ministry will explore ways for strengthening and empowering the Uganda Association of External Recruitment Agencies (UAERA) to be able to regulate its Membership and comply with the requirements and standards of labour externalization. Cases of recruitment of under-age

Workers (-21 years), forgery of medical reports (e.g COVID Test Results), concealment of pregnancies by Migrant Workers, failure to conduct the mandatory pre-departure orientation and training, enforcement of the requirement to submit travel plans for all Migrant Workers to both the Ministry and Embassies in Destination Countries will be addressed.

10. There will be periodic reviews of the entire clearance process to curb trafficking in persons. This includes the Quarterly Inter-Agency meetings on trafficking in persons. Given the complex nature of and players involved in perpetrating this vice (of human trafficking) a specialised Task Force that draws participation from oversight security Agencies (e.g. SHACU, CMI, CID among others) is being considered.

Finally, in our meeting with H. E. Ahmad Sulaiman Alrajhi, Minister of Human Resources and Social Development of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, it was agreed that there would be a ministerial review meeting in three (3) months' time to assess progress towards resolving the challenges that were jointly identified.

Institutionalization of frameworks for continuous engagement at both the technical (through the JTC) and political levels (Ministerial Meetings) between the two countries (Uganda/Saudi Arabia) is a significant achievement that offers us an opportunity to agree desired actions, track implementation and regularly report on progress in order to realise mutual benefit and also find more sustainable solutions to the challenges of labour externalization.

At the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, we are committed to the attainment of safe, orderly and decent migration for all Ugandans destined to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and all other destinations.

**FOR GOD AND MY COUNTRY**

**02.02.22**