

Chief Justice begins Southwestern Uganda Tour, tours Kisoro, Rubanda courts

The Chief Justice, Justice Dr. Flavian Zeija has commenced a three-day tour of courts in Southwestern Uganda, beginning with engagements at Kisoro and Rubanda Magistrates' Courts, where he met judicial officers and a wide range of justice sector stakeholders to discuss ways of strengthening justice service delivery and deepening collaboration.

The Chief Justice was accompanied by Justice Karoli Lwanga Ssemogerere, the Resident Judge of Kabale High Court, Dr. Pius Bigirimana, the Permanent Secretary and Secretary to the Judiciary, and HW Lamunu Pamella Ocaya, the Acting Chief Registrar.



Highlights of Kisoro CM Court Visit

At Kisoro Chief Magistrate's Court, Justice Dr. Zeija said the visit formed part of the Judiciary's broader efforts to maintain direct engagement with local leaders and justice stakeholders in order to improve service delivery. He said such engagements complement other Judiciary outreach platforms, including Court Open Days and District Chain-Linked Committee meetings, which are intended to provide regular feedback between the courts and the communities they serve.

The Chief Justice used the engagement to highlight ongoing reforms aimed at improving access to justice, especially for ordinary citizens. He described the recent amendment to the Magistrates' Courts Act as one of the Judiciary's major achievements, noting that it had significantly expanded the jurisdiction of lower courts. Under the amendment, the pecuniary jurisdiction of Chief Magistrates has increased from Shs50 million to Shs200 million, while that of Grade One Magistrates has risen to Shs100 million.

He said the reform would reduce the number of matters escalating to the High Court, since many disputes will now be handled at lower courts closer to the people. In Kisoro, he noted, most land

disputes fall within that limit, meaning litigants will no longer have to travel to Kabale for matters that can be resolved at Kisoro Chief Magistrate's Court.

On decentralisation, JustyDr. Zeija said the Judiciary was continuing with efforts to take the Court of Appeal closer to the people through the establishment of regional appellate courts. He said construction was underway for a Court of Appeal in Mbarara to serve the Western Region and another in Gulu for the Northern Region, while the Eastern Region is expected to benefit from a similar development in Mbale next year, subject to availability of resources.



Responding to concerns raised by Kisoro Chief Magistrate HW Bamuhiga Patrick on the lack of a remand home for juvenile offenders, the Chief Justice described the issue as a longstanding national challenge requiring broader structural reform. He explained that remand homes were previously managed under local governments, but uneven funding and cost-sharing disputes later led to their transfer

to the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development. However, he noted that financing and transportation challenges continue to affect their effective operation.

On the absence of State Attorneys at Bunagana and Kyanika courts, Dr. Zeija stressed the need to rationalise limited resources and make better use of the personnel available. He said he would engage the Director of Public Prosecutions on the possibility of extending services through circuit arrangements, just as judicial officers already do. He also acknowledged concerns regarding delays in the committal of capital cases, saying the issue reflected wider systemic constraints that continue to affect timely case progression.

He further addressed a request to operationalise Rubuguri Magistrate's Court, explaining that the initial piece of land that had been offered was too small. Adding that another site had since been secured and was already being prepared, with construction expected to commence soon.

On bail applications and sentencing, following concerns raised by the prosecution, the Chief Justice highlighted the importance of hearing both sides. He said sentencing remains a judicial process in which the State argues for an appropriate sentence and the defence responds, after which the judicial officer makes a determination. On bail, he said discretion rests with the court, guided by submissions from the prosecution and police, who are often more familiar with the facts of the case.

Justice Dr. Zeija also pointed to the particular challenges presented by refugee-related offences in border areas such as Kisoro, noting that offenders can easily cross back into neighbouring countries before trial. He said such cases should be prioritised for speedy disposal and recalled a previous arrangement in Mbarara where UNHCR supported special court sessions involving refugees. He encouraged similar engagement in Kisoro.

He attributed overstay on remand largely to funding and manpower constraints, which slow case disposal and contribute to congestion in prisons. On abandoned children living in Uganda without parents, the Chief Justice said such children remain the responsibility of the State until proper guardianship is established, regardless of their nationality.

Justice Ssemogerere described Kisoro as a strategically important magisterial area within the Kabale High Court Circuit, noting that its location along the borders with the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda makes it particularly vulnerable to transnational crime, including trafficking and suspects crossing borders to evade arrest. He said these realities increase the jurisprudential significance of the area and require coordinated action by justice and security institutions.

He commended the strong cooperation among justice actors within the Kabale Circuit, saying it had played a major role in improving case disposal and reducing backlog. Noting that cases that had once dated back as far as 2012 had now been cleared, and that for the first time, appeals from lower courts filed in 2025 had been heard and in some cases determined by the High Court within the same year.

Justice Ssemogerere also highlighted the increasing use of virtual and hybrid court proceedings, saying the innovations were helping to improve access to justice by reducing costs for litigants. He cited the example of the widow of former Bishop Ernest Shalita, who was able to follow court proceedings from home while her children participated from Kampala, Europe and the United States, with counsel appearing from Kampala, all at no cost to the parties or the Judiciary.

He called for the establishment of a sub-regional Ministry of Lands office in Kisoro, noting the rising number of land disputes driven by unregistered interests, fragmented family ownership and increasing land values. He said the disputes disproportionately affect vulnerable groups, especially women heading households. He also raised concern about special categories of cases involving children with foreign parents but resident in Uganda, saying these require tailored legal and administrative attention.

Dr. Bigirimana described the Chief Justice's presence in Kisoro as deliberate and symbolic, saying the district occupies a unique place in Uganda's geography and national identity. He said the visit reflected the Judiciary's transformation agenda and hailed Justice Dr. Zeija as a fast-paced and reform-minded leader. He urged judicial officers and staff to match that pace in the implementation of reforms.

The Permanent Secretary also recalled his long working relationship with the Chief Justice dating back to his tenure as Principal Judge and pledged continued support to the transformation agenda, which he said builds on foundations laid by Chief Justice Emeritus Justice Alfonse Chigamoy Owiny - Dollo, particularly in court construction, ICT development, human resource management and financial reforms.

At Kisoro, HW Bamuhiga reported that the magisterial area, managed by only three judicial officers, covers 13 sub-counties, eight town councils and one municipality. In addition to Kisoro Chief Magistrate's Court, he said the area includes Bunagana and Kyanika courts located at Uganda's borders with the DRC and Rwanda respectively.

He reported a total of 410 pending matters across the magisterial area, of which 299 are at Kisoro Chief Magistrate's Court, with only four backlog cases remaining. He said the court was working towards eliminating backlog through close stakeholder engagement and improved case management. He also cited weekly cause lists, public noticeboards, weeding out of non-starter cases, first-in-first-out scheduling, and the use of alternative dispute resolution mechanisms such as plea bargaining, mediation and the Small Claims Procedure as measures helping to expedite justice.

Representing the prosecution, Resident Senior State Attorney Christopher Ainomugisha said Kisoro has only three State Attorneys, who are not permitted to circuit to Bunagana and Kyanika. He appealed for engagement with DPP headquarters to allow circuiting so that litigants can access prosecution services at their nearest court stations. He also urged that judicial officers give due consideration to prosecution submissions on bail and sentencing.

The Resident District Commissioner, Hajji Badru Ssebyala, said remandees had raised concerns with him about delays in committal of capital cases and the continued detention of suspects in cases where complainants are unavailable. He also requested more regular sensitisation of inmates by justice institutions so they can better understand court processes and be supported toward rehabilitation.

Representing the Kisoro District leadership, Vice Chairman Alex Nambajimana commended the Judiciary for decentralising courts and extending services to hard-to-reach areas such as Rubuguri. He said this had eased access to justice in an area characterised by difficult terrain and appealed for the full operationalisation of Rubuguri Court.

Rubanda Court engagement

At Rubanda Magistrate's Court, the Chief Justice continued his call for people-centred justice, with particular emphasis on mediation in family disputes. He noted that many such matters can be resolved outside formal litigation and said the recent amendments to the Magistrates' Courts Act would further strengthen access to justice.

He thanked the District for availing land for the construction of court infrastructure, noting the difficulty of securing land in a densely populated area. He also reiterated the Judiciary's commitment to reducing reliance on rented premises, which he said create operational inefficiencies, and spoke about ongoing decentralisation efforts involving the Inspectorate of Courts.

On concerns regarding gazetted but non-operational courts such as Muko and Bubaale, the Chief Justice said court planning had taken into account terrain and accessibility challenges, and assured stakeholders that efforts were underway to ensure such courts are staffed and operationalised. He also pledged to engage the DPP to prioritise underserved areas such as Rubanda and support rational deployment of State Attorneys to circuit courts.

Addressing reports of crime, including highway robbery, Justice Dr. Zeija said such problems require a coordinated and holistic response from all justice actors. He warned that working in silos would only allow crime to thrive.

Justice Ssemogerere, speaking at Rubanda, thanked the district's political and civic leaders for their almost perfect attendance at Regional Coordination Committee meetings in Kabale. He called for a more balanced distribution of courts across the circuit and highlighted growing challenges in the area, including land disputes, exploitative money lending and highway robbery.

Dr. Bigirimana said the Judiciary's transformation programme was already visible through the establishment and construction of courts such as those planned for Rubanda and Rubuguri. On understaffing at Rubanda Court, he said efforts were underway through the Judicial Service Commission to recruit more staff, while redistribution from better-staffed courts would also be considered in the interim.

He added that engineers would be dispatched next week to inspect the land provided for Rubanda Court and assess its suitability for construction. He also pledged to provide the court with a motorcycle to support file transportation and a computer before the end of June.

HW Byamugisha Derrick, the Chief Magistrate of Kabale, reported that Rubanda has 571 pending cases. He said although Muko and Bubaale courts had been gazetted, they remain non-operational, leaving Rubanda as the only functional court in the area. He described the court as severely understaffed, with only one clerk and one process server, and highlighted persistent challenges including lack of internet connectivity, inadequate furniture, continued operation from rented premises, transport constraints affecting police files, and only one computer for court operations.

Representing the DPP, Regional Officer Ms. Grace Nabaggala, said the prosecution service remains understaffed but is continuing to lobby for more State Attorneys for Rubanda and Rukiga in order to strengthen service delivery.

The engagements offered the Chief Justice an opportunity to receive firsthand feedback from court users and justice actors, address pressing concerns, and explore practical measures to improve the administration of justice in the region.

The meetings were attended by judicial officers and a broad range of stakeholders, including representatives of the Uganda Police Force, Uganda Prisons Service, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, advocates, the Uganda People's Defence Force, Immigration, district and religious leaders, as well as members of the public.

Proceedings were moderated by the Judiciary's Public Relations Officer, HW James Ereemye Jumire Mawanda.

Rose Ampurira & Danielle Nalukenge