

The US ambassador says the kind of data they require from Uganda will help them assess the progress toward realisation of commitments in the new health agreement.

BY TONNY ABET

Pressure is mounting on the officials from the Ugandan government and the United States Embassy in Kampala to make public the bilateral health agreement, signed between the two parties last week.

The agreement, among other commitments by both parties to improve Uganda's health system and prevent epidemics, also obligates Uganda to share its health data with the USA.

This is in addition to the requirement for Uganda to allocate more than \$500 million (Shs1.7 trillion) over the next five years to realise specific commitments in the \$2.3 billion deal.

This provision on the data-sharing and local contribution, amid the failure of the two governments to make the agreement public, has increased suspicions and privacy concerns among members of the public and the Opposition in Parliament.

While appearing on a KFM radio talk show, the Hot Seat on Wednesday evening, the Ambassador of the United States of America to Uganda, Mr William Popp, defended the bilateral health agreement and said there is no need for alarm over data sharing.

"So, first of all, this is an agreement that is meant to be results-oriented," Mr Popp said. "So, a lot of folks are kind of asking, Why do you need this data? Well, first of all, think national statistics. Think national aggregated information. Not individual, not personal information, not my status, not if I went to the doctor."

The ambassador added that the kind of data they require will help them assess the progress toward the realisation of commitments in the agreement.

"If 10,000 people are on antiretrovirals in one district, and their rate of infection is going up, then we know we're not doing as much work as we need to in that area," he said.

"If the amount of new cases in a particular area total is going down, we

# US envoy and govt defend health data-sharing deal



Left to right: Health Minister, Dr Jane Ruth Aceng, Finance Minister Matia Kasaija and US Ambassador to Uganda William Popp after the signing of the bilateral health MoU in Kampala on December 10. PHOTO/ GEOFREY MUTUMBA

know that our assistance, both the United States' assistance and Uganda's assistance, is having an impact. And that's also important to know in this memorandum of understanding (MoU), it's not just the United States investing \$1.7 billion, it's Uganda investing almost \$600 million of new money for that total of \$2.3 billion," he added.

The MoU, signed by Finance Minister Matia Kasaija on December 10 on behalf of Uganda, commits the country to put that money (about \$600 million) as its contribution.

## Legislators in the dark

But the job of appropriating money is done by Parliament, yet the Leader of Opposition in Parliament (LoP), Mr Joel Ssenyonyi, said legislators were kept in the dark in the discussions leading to the MoU.

"There's been no parliamentary scrutiny. There are concerns about data protection, medical data and so on. Our colleagues in Kenya went to court because there was a similar deal signed by the

## Govt position.

"If the requirement is for us to bring every agreement that government is going to sign to Parliament, then we should write the law and say so. But otherwise, government reports to Parliament in the manner that is set in the law," — **Kiryowa Kiwanuka, Attorney General**

Kenyan government with the US government," he told Parliament on December 16.

"So citizens went to court, and they said we are concerned about data protection, and court has halted that deal. Why is government not keeping us in the loop if it is so good a deal as it is being portrayed to be? Why do you not want parliamentary scrutiny? We get to know what kind of agreement is this? What is there really so that we are brought up to speed?" he added.

In response, the Attorney General, Kiryowa Kiwanuka, said they will follow procedures if Parliament wants to know the content of the agreement.

"If the requirement is for us to bring every agreement that government is going to sign to Parliament, then we should write the law and say so. But otherwise, government reports to Parliament in the manner that is set in the law," he said.

"Every committee interacts with the government agency, and when that time comes, when we are called upon to report on health, we shall report on it. But what I can assure you, right honourable Speaker, is that and honourable colleague is yes government did sign an agreement, and yes, the agreement is in place, and it is within the law," he added.

But the LoP even had more concerns given the requirement for Parliament to pass the budget for the commitments to be realised.

"When you say that of the \$2.3 billion, the US government is going to shoulder

a part of it, the rest of it is supposed to be by us. So you have gotten us into that agreement without us cross-checking," he said.

"Where is this money going to be found? Because what that means is we have to look for the money, we either borrow as we normally do, even today we are going to be here borrowing or to say the tax man collect this much and that kind of thing," he said.

"That is why I think it's prudent that Parliament is not at the tail end because we are always here planning together, budgeting together because of that fiscal obligation on us as a country, and it begins here," he added.

Mr Thomas Tayebwa, the Deputy Speaker of Parliament, who was chairing the plenary, said the matter would be handled by the Parliamentary Health Committee.

"The sectoral committee on health will be looking at these huge sums of money that would be required and, in the process, get to study this agreement," he said.

Asked on KFM why they have not made the agreement public, Popp said: "Well, it's a government-to-government agreement, so again, decisions can be made about how much is publicised in terms of details."

"But I would just come back on the data agreement. To be very, very clear, this is not personal information. There's a lot of misinformation out there that is claiming, Oh, it's personally identifiable information," he added.

On whether the US government considered Parliament scrutiny as important, given their promotion of democracy, Mr Popp said: "This is for the Ministry of Finance and the Ugandan government to coordinate with the Ugandan Parliament, of course."

"But these are also planning figures. So just like in the US, when we commit to this amount of money, this is on an annual basis. We will also be going to our Congress, notifying them of this executive commitment. And then that money will have to be appropriated by the Congress, and I am sure that's very similar to how it will be here in Uganda..." he added.