

Worry and chaos: It is back to school season

Across Uganda this week, the familiar sounds are back; the blare of city horns, the growl of engines; and the slow-moving jam of vehicles clustered around school gates. For parents watching from verandas, clinging to motorbikes, or peering through taxi windows, the back-to-school season feels like a knot in the stomach, a mix of hope for their children's future and anxiety about their general safety as they step out into the world each day.

While the government and traffic authorities urge parents to escort their children to school and teach them road safety, the advice sounds good on paper and is clearly well-intended. In reality, however, for many of us, it feels as if it comes from a life we simply cannot live. How is a single mother in Kampala, hustling three jobs just to pay school fees and rent, supposed to stand by the road-

side every morning and afternoon?

How does a father in a remote corner of Karamoja, whose child walks 10 kilometres between home and the nearest school along a dusty, unmarked track, find a zebra crossing to teach them?

For these parents, that "good advice" does not bring relief. It brings guilt. A sense that we are gambling with our children's lives, sending them out into a system we know is shaky, hoping that luck will be on their side more mornings than not.

So, in the spaces that policy has forgotten, I hope parents remember to remind their children: "Look both ways. Do not run in the road. Hold your friend's hand. Watch for the red car that always appears when the truck parks there."

This is more than safety talk. It is a prayer, a wish whispered in-

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to their ears before the backpacks are zipped, before the shoes are tightened, before the gate closes behind them. When parents cannot walk with their children all the way to school, words become their only shield.

They repeat the same phrases not because those words can build roads or fix careless drivers, but because they are the closest things to control that tired hands can reach. They say them over and over because silence would feel like surrender, like standing aside and letting their children walk into danger without even trying to shield them with something, anything.

And yet, beneath all this fear, is a strong, stubborn, faithful hope. It is the hope that this term, like the last one, will close with the

same outcome; children returning at the end of the day, backpacks a little heavier, voices a little hoarse from singing and shouting, shoes scuffed but eyes still bright. It is the hope that the bell will ring, the bus will stop, and the boda boda will slow down, just enough, for every child to pass through the gate again, still alive, still whole.

Every new term is an uncomfortable reminder that our children walk to school every morning through spaces that were never built with them in mind. They dodge buses that ignore "school zone" signs, weave through boda bodas racing to squeeze in more fares, and hitch rides in rickety vehicles with worn-out brakes and crooked mirrors. The tension we feel each morning, the breath

held as we wait to see hear them knock at the gate in the evening is really a silent plea for something better; proper footpaths, marked crossings, slower speed limits near schools, and real enforcement of traffic laws.

But hope, even in the midst of that anger and frustration, is still alive and strong. It is the hope that keeps a mother on her knees praying before the alarm even rings.

It is the hope that makes a father double-check his child's uniform, shoes, and bag one extra time, as if somehow order at home can balance the chaos outside.

It is the Ugandan resilience that says, despite everything we face, this next generation must have a life and a future that are better than the road outside our door shows today.

As the new term begins, may that hope guide us, in our homes, in our conversations, and in our louder voices to those who shape our cities and our roads. Because our children do not just deserve good grades and passing marks. They deserve to walk safely to school in the morning and walk safely back home in the evening. They do not deserve to be the price of our poorly planned traffic systems.

And until that reality becomes ordinary, our fervent prayers, our sharp warnings, and our determined advocacy must walk with them every single day. I wish you all a safe and fruitful school year.