

Since its launch in 2014, the annual Kabaka Birthday Run has grown from a modest local race into a national platform for wellness and public-health action.

BY GEORGE KATONGOLE

As is the tradition since its launch in 2014, thousands of Ugandans yesterday hit the various streets running in commemoration of the 13th edition of Kabaka Ronald Mutebi's 71st birthday run.

Sunday's turnout reflected sustained progress. For the first time in recent memory, the run was held without rain, although participants waited about 40 minutes longer than usual for the Kabaka's arrival.

The streets were painted red as thousands matched to Mengo Lubiri for the flag-off.

Mengo Lubiri grounds were filled as early as 6am, with runners patiently waiting until 7:40 am when His Majesty Ronald Mutebi II arrived to loud cheers.

He waved to his subjects before flagging off the three race categories: the 21km half-marathon, 10km race, and the mass 5km run, at 8am, using a double-sided flag bearing Buganda and Uganda emblems.

Running under the theme: "Men for Good Health to Save the Girl Child and the Fight to End HIV/Aids by 2030," the kingdom re-echoed its commitment in its sustained effort to fight HIV/Aids and fistula, among other initiatives.

The HIV/Aids awareness and prevention has been central to the Buganda Kingdom's initiatives since 2017.

While addressing Kabaka's subjects, the Katikkiro of Buganda, Mr Charles Peter Mayega urged the young people to take personal responsibility in the fight against HIV/Aids, warning against complacency despite years of progress.

He said the massive turnout reflected a shared commitment to ending the epidemic, but stressed the need for discipline, especially among the youth.

"The people who have come here today are committed to keeping themselves safe from HIV/Aids. Young people must avoid risky behaviour for a better future," he stressed.

Since its launch in 2014, the annual Kabaka Birthday Run has grown from a modest local race into a national platform for wellness and public-health action.

The annual run has since evolved from early campaigns against obstetric fistula and sickle cell disease to a sustained focus on HIV/Aids awareness and prevention drive.

The Katikkiro also cautioned against losing focus on Buganda's core values, calling for unity and loyalty to the king-

# Thousands attend Kabaka Birthday Run



Thousands of runners flood the Kabaka Njagala Road during the Kabaka Birthday Run on Sunday.

PHOTO/GEORGE MUTUMBA



Kabaka Ronald Mutebi II flags off the 2026 Kabaka Birthday Run yesterday. PHOTO/IBRAHIM KAVUMA

dom's vision.

"Stay grounded in the ideals of the kingdom and remain steadfast in your loyalty to the Kabaka. That unity is what sustains this cause," he added.

## Progress and concern

Uganda has registered notable gains in the fight against HIV/Aids. National prevalence among adults aged 15-49 has declined to 4.9 percent in 2024 from 7.3 percent in 2010, while new in-

fections have dropped from 96,000 to 37,000.

Access to antiretroviral therapy has expanded to more than 1.3 million Ugandans, improving survival and viral suppression rates. However, concerns remain, particularly among adolescent girls and young women.

Addressing the masses, the Nation Media Group Uganda Managing Director, Ms Susan Nsibirwa, said the trend demands renewed urgency from all sectors, especially the media.

"We cannot afford to lose the gains we have made over the years. The rising infections among teenage girls should concern all of us because they point to deeper structural challenges," she said.

"As a media house, we recognise that these young girls are not statistics, they are someone's daughters, sisters and future leaders. We must consistently highlight the underlying issues such as gender-based violence, early marriage, poverty, and limited access to sexual and reproductive health services."

Ms Nsibirwa, added: "We must go beyond reporting numbers. There are deeper, human stories that must be told to keep this conversation alive and to influence behaviour change. That is how we contribute meaningfully to ending HIV/Aids," she added.

## HIV INFECTIONS

According to UNAIDS data, between 3,300 and 4,000 young women aged 15-24 in sub-Saharan Africa are infected with HIV every week, accounting for 63 percent of new infections.

Airtel Uganda confirmed that all 130,000 kits for the run were sold out, underscoring the growing reach of the initiative.

"The sell-out is a strong statement about how deeply Ugandans have embraced this cause. As Airtel, we are proud to be part of a platform that goes beyond a run to drive a national conversation. This year's theme challenges men to take responsibility, particularly in protecting the girl child, and that is a message we fully support," said Mr David Birungi, Airtel Uganda public relations manager.

He added: "We know that behaviour change starts with awareness and honest conversations. Through this partnership with Buganda Kingdom and UNAIDS, we can reach communities at scale. In that, we will remind people to test, to protect themselves and their partners, and to ensure that those living with HIV stay on treatment. Ending HIV/Aids by 2030 is possible, but only if we all play our part."

The price of the kits increased from Shs20,000 to Shs25,000 this year, yet demand remained high. Participation extended beyond Kampala, with runners taking part from sub-county headquarters across Buganda's 18 counties as well as in the diaspora.

Last year's run highlighted the initiative's growing impact, raising approximately Shs2.9b. The funds have since supported community sensitisation, expanded testing, counselling services, and sustained awareness campaigns across the region.

## Collective effort

Corporate participation also remained a key pillar of the run's success, with companies mobilising staff and communities.

I&M Bank Uganda Chief Executive Officer Robin Bairstow said such initiatives are vital in shaping public attitudes and driving collective responsibility.

"Platforms like this mobilise communities and create the kind of awareness that leads to real change in behaviour," he said.

The Uganda Baati Head of External and Corporate Affairs, Ms Jackie Tuhakanizibwa, said sustained awareness is essential in maintaining progress.

"A healthy society is critical for national development, and initiatives like this help ensure that people remain informed and proactive about their health," she said.

Youth voices were also present, with Little Miss Africa 2025/26, Serena Abigail Makumbi urging her peers to remain vigilant. "This is about protecting our future," she said.

With infections declining but risks among young women persisting, the Kabaka Birthday Run is increasingly becoming not just a symbol of awareness, but a critical tool in sustaining Uganda's gains in the fight against HIV/Aids.

See related story on Page 40