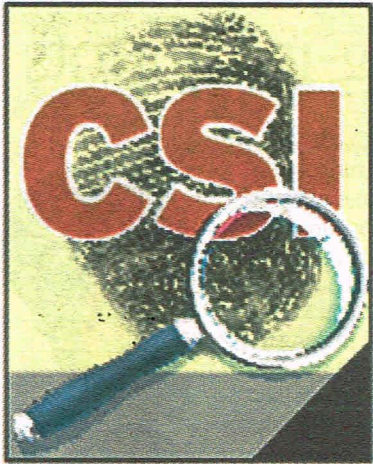


HOW SUSPECTED CHILD KIDNAPPER WAS TRACKED



CRIME | SUSPENSE | INTRIGUE



Police publicist: Kituuma



Suspect: Odongo

There has been a worrying trend of child abductions in Kampala. At the centre of some of these kidnappings is a suspect identified as Isaac Odongo, writes **SIMON MASABA**

On May 3, a mother from Makerere, a Kampala suburb, answered a telephone call that changed her life. It was a voice of a stranger but with a bargain — a ransom for her five-year-old son.

Ramathan Kibira had been missing since the previous afternoon. The man who had taken him was demanding sh4m and giving her little time to find it. She did not have it. She bargained. She pleaded. By the time the call ended, she had agreed to pay sh40,000. The call triggered panic, and by close of business that night, she had sent sh40,000 to a number she did not know, in exchange for the safe return of her son. Shortly before midnight, Kibira was found abandoned in Kalerwe, alive.

Police said Isaac Odongo, an average-built young man of dark complexion with sharp protruding cheekbones, is at the centre of one of Kampala's most alarming child abduction cases in recent memory.

Detectives said in just five days, three boys, all below six, were snatched from Nakulabye and Kawempe. Investigations indicate that these were well-calculated kidnap-for-ransom operations.

Odongo, the man Police says is behind these recent kidnaps, was arrested on May 4 in Nakulabye Zone 7.

"We arrested him in the same

neighbourhood where the victim was kidnapped days earlier.

"Kasubi, Nakulabye, and the surrounding neighbourhoods of Kawempe division, are the kind of places in Kampala where the kidnapper runs his cartel. These areas are thick with small traders, bodaboda stages, and the smell of roasting maize. Children spill out of narrow compounds onto dusty lanes the moment school lets out, kicking footballs, chasing each other between parked cars," a detective said.

He added: "By evening, the area pulses differently; music from nearby entertainment joints drifts through the air, bars fill up, and the neighbourhoods settle into the loud, unhurried rhythm of working-class Kampala at rest. It is a place where everyone knows their neighbour's children by name. That familiarity, investigators now believe, is precisely what Odongo counted on."

THE ABDUCTIONS

Detectives said the first case was reported in April. Joram Yosam Kalenzi was six years old when he disappeared. He was out playing with friends when a stranger called him over. He vanished.

Police spokesperson Rusoke Kituuma said Odongo contacted the family and demanded ransom. When payment was not forthcoming, he transported the child out of Kampala and abandoned him in Njeru, near the Jinja Bridge.

Two days later, detectives said, Odongo was back. On April 30, he kidnapped five-year-old Ethan Kasirye from Nakulabye. Again, when the family delayed to pay the ransom, he transported the child to Lira — and abandoned him there. This trend puzzled investigators.

ABOUT SUSPECT

The Police said Isaac Odongo, an average-built young man of dark complexion with sharp protruding cheekbones, is at the centre of one of Kampala's most alarming child abduction cases in recent memory.

Detectives said in just five days, three boys, all below six, were snatched from Nakulabye and Kawempe, both suburbs of Kampala.

"How he moved the child that distance remains a subject of ongoing investigations," Kituuma said.

† Then on May 2, Odongo struck again. Kibira, aged five, was taken from Makerere. His family received a ransom call. The following evening, after receiving sh40,000 from Kibira's desperate mother, Odongo released the child and abandoned him in Kalerwe at around 11:00pm.

THE HUNT

With three children scattered across the country and three separate case files open, the Police mounted an intelligence-led operation. Kituuma confirmed that advanced policing technology was deployed to track Odongo.

On May 4, at around 6:00pm, operatives from the Flying Squad, a crack unit under the Police's Directorate of Crime Intelligence headed by Maj. Gen. Christopher Damulira, arrested Odongo.

In custody, detectives said he allegedly made a full confession, admitting to all three abductions. He also detailed how he planned what detectives have described as "the kidnapping cartel" in Kampala.

MORE CASES REGISTERED

Police said Odongo's case is not an isolated crime.

"It is the latest chapter in a deepening crisis of child abductions across the Kampala Metropolitan policing area," a detective said.

"In November last year, masked gunmen stormed the home of Dr Moses Ndiwalana Mbuga in Njeru municipality, Buikwe district, held his family at gunpoint, robbed them of sh1.65m, and kidnapped the couple's six-year-old daughter, Kaira Nankya Mbuga, fleeing into the night. In September 2024, a jilted boyfriend, Joseph Ssekyanzi of Kawempe division, kidnapped his own four-year-old daughter and demanded sh50m from the child's mother," the detective added.

The four-year-old child was eventually rescued, but Ssekyanzi fled and remains at large.

"Imagine kidnapping your own daughter just because you separated from the mother," the deputy Kampala Metropolitan Police spokesperson, Luke Owoyesigiyire, said. That same month, Police were pursuing the kidnappers of Hope Biyinzika, a three-year-old nursery pupil from Mukono district, and Shafik Ssesanga Nsubuga, a two-year-old from Kayunga district.

➤ **A RECENT POLICE CRIME REPORT INDICATED THAT 206 KIDNAPPING CASES WERE REGISTERED IN 2025, DOWN FROM 245 IN 2024.**

In the latter case, the father was directed to a location near a bank in Kayunga town where, instead of his son, he found only the child's clothes dumped in a black polythene bag.

A recent Police annual crime report, which was released in February, indicated that 206 kidnapping cases were registered in 2025, down from 245 in 2024.

The same week of Odongo's arrest, Police in Kisubi, Wakiso district, recovered 11-year-old Victor Katungi, a Primary Six pupil who had vanished from St Savio Junior School on April 23. Katungi was recovered at his mother's place in Fort Portal. And in Kakiri, also in Wakiso, the body of Tony Ssewakiryanga, a 25-year-old trader, was recovered bearing multiple stab wounds. Police said Ssewakiryanga was a victim of a kidnap-for-ransom plot that turned fatal. A key suspect, Ibrahim Magara, has since been arrested.

POLICE GIVES TIPS

Odongo's arrest comes after schools broke off for the first term holidays, a period Police warn historically sees a sharp spike in crimes against children. Police's deputy spokesperson, Diana Nandawula, said: "We normally register cases of child neglect, sexual abuse, labour exploitation, and the involvement of minors in criminal activities. Child protection is both a parental duty and a community responsibility."

Police and child protection authorities, Nandawula said, have since offered practical guidance to parents on how to keep children safe.

"Never leave young children unsupervised, even briefly, and ensure any adult left in charge is known and trusted. Teach children never to accept lifts, gifts, or company from strangers, and to always tell a trusted adult where they are going. Avoid sharing children's routines or school details on social media — kidnappers increasingly exploit such information. Ensure every child old enough to speak knows at least one emergency contact number by heart," she said.

"If the worst happens, report immediately to the nearest police station, preserve all communication from abductors without responding impulsively, and avoid publicising ransom demands on social media, as this can compromise rescue operations," she added.