

## [The Road to Gulu](#)

### **Robert Remington, Calgary Herald- Blog**

Kampala, Uganda

"Any place we see gas, we fill up," says my driver, Dusman Okee. "Tomorrow, there could be a crisis."

As president of the Uganda's Southern Motor Club, which organizes events like the Kampala-to-Kigali rally between the capitals of Uganda and Rwanda, Dusman is not only an obviously good driver, but a dependable guy to have on the ground in Uganda. He speaks a multitude of local languages and helped organize transport for the Last King of Scotland, which won Forest Whitaker an Academy Award for best actor as Idi Amin.



Dusman drove Whitaker around Kampala during filming. "How was I?" Whitaker asked him after one scene. Dusman answered in character, as one of Amin's driver's might have answered to avoid the wrath of the self-proclaimed His Excellency, President for Life, Field Marshal Al Hadji Doctor Idi Amin Dada, VC, DSO, MC, Conqueror of the British Empire in Africa in General and Uganda in Particular and the Most Ubiquitous of all King Of Scotland. "Very good, Mr. President," Dusman told him. They both had a good laugh.

Dusman is what foreign journalists refer to as a "fixer," a person who knows the local scene, will get you where you need to go, and keep you out of jams. Dusman is also the Uganda field representative for the Ssubi Foundation, a private family foundation run by Calgary's Ellie Siebens, Philip Ndugga and Philip's wife, Tracy.

After meeting Dusman at my hotel, we headed to Gulu, six hours north of Kampala on the worst highway I have ever seen, to do do a story on the effects of 21 years of civil war on the region and the work of Canadian aid agencies there.

To avoid Kampala's notorious traffic, we leave at 6 a.m. Kampala, like Rome, is built on seven hills, which quickly give way to a mostly flat, lush landscape as we head north. The narrow road is filled with potholes, which makes driving a matter of dodging them by whatever means possible, including driving on the shoulder or through the bush if necessary.

The cheapest gas we find is about \$1.50 a litre, but it can go as high as \$2 or more

depending on locale. This is the price Uganda is paying as fallout for the political crisis in neighbouring Kenya, where 1,000 people have died and 600,000 are displaced in turmoil resulting from a disputed Dec. 27 election.

Everything coming into Uganda comes by road or rail, most of it through the Kenyan port of Mombassa. Demonstrations in Mombassa slowed supplies to a trickle last month. An angry mob in the Nairobi slum of Kibera also tore up the railway tracks through Kibera to punish Uganda after its president, Yoweri Museveni, congratulated Kenyan president Mwai Kibaki for winning the election.

Kibaki is a member of the Kikuyu tribe and the Kibera slum is predominantly Luo, which supports Opposition Leader Raila Odinga. Odinga lost the election in what is widely accepted to have been a rigged vote by Kibaki.

Museveni's support for Kibaki infuriated the Luo. There were rumours that Ugandan troops had been sent undercover to Kenya to crack down on demonstrators, which spurred the Kibera mob to rip up the track. As a result, everything in Uganda is expensive and in short supply, from medicine to petrol. At the peak of the crisis, the cost of a litre of fuel nearly hit \$6 for several days.

Except for major hotels and some shopping centres, Uganda is almost entirely a cash economy. Credit cards are useless in Gulu, which made it necessary to carry a wad of \$1 million Ugandan shillings, or about \$600 CDN, for hotel, fuel and food, which proved to be not enough. It's little wonder that banditry is common.

Our first stop in Gulu was at a displaced persons camp housing 19,000 people — refugees from the brutal civil war that has been quiet now for 18 months — so Dusman could show me the school Ssubi has built in the camp. In a remarkable achievement for an area where the simplest project can drag on for months, Ssubi built the school in less than 30 days.

Dusman and Ndugga, a former regional kick-boxing champion from Uganda who now works as a personal trainer in Calgary, started the work themselves to show the locals that they were not just another NGO long on intention but short on results. Before long, Dusman and Philip had attracted an army of volunteer help.

After three days in Gulu, we headed back to Kampala, swerving to dodge potholes the size of small craters. Children along the road operate as makeshift maintenance crews and ask for money for their pothole repair work. Dusman doesn't offer any money. He's driven this road many times and sees the same children fixing the same pothole for months.

Considering Ssubi's success building the school, perhaps it could turn its attention to Uganda's pockmarked northern highway.