

# Envoy on why Poland will remember 1942 arrival of refugees in Uganda

Bilateral relations between Uganda and Poland are among the least pronounced, but the two countries go back a long way during World War II when some 20,000 Polish refugees persecuted by the Soviets and the German Nazi were offered sanctuary in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania by Britain, then coloniser of the three countries. *Sunday Monitor's Frederic Musisi* caught up with the Polish ambassador Jacek Bazański in Nairobi, who is also accredited to Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles, Somalia and Uganda.

**Officially Poland established diplomatic relations with Uganda in 1963, but we both know ties go back to World War II. How relevant is this aspect of history?**

It is correct to state that the cordial relationship between our countries was in fact initiated long before the official agreements were made. After the Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939, many Poles were deported and ended up in the forced labour camps deep in Siberia. After the German invasion of the Soviet Union and signing of the Sikorski-Mayski Agreement in 1942, arrangements were made for the release of the Poles in Russian captivity, both civilians and military.

Almost 20,000 of them escaped and found new homes in East Africa, whose large parts were then administered by London. At that time, Poles were the largest minority of European origin in the region and have gone on to be the initial envoys of cultural ties.

Several Polish memorial sites, including a few cemeteries and a Catholic church, have survived from that time, mainly in Kojja/Mpunge in Mukono, and Nyabyeya in Masindi District. Today, Uganda is inhabited by a much smaller, but equally vibrant Polish community. One of the Poles, Fr Wojciech Ulman, the superior of the Franciscan mission in Uganda, was in March decorated by the Polish minister of Foreign Affairs with the Bene Merito honorary distinction.

**Not much is known about Uganda, a country thousands of miles away from Europe, hosting Polish refugees. What are you doing as a country/ Embassy to keep this history alive?**

The embassy takes care of the Polish heritage sites in the region. We make sure that they are kept in good condition and there is always someone around who can tell the visitors the story of the arrival of Poles to East Africa. I take this opportunity to thank the members of the Polish Development Organisation Uganda for their highly valuable activities aimed at commemorating and popularising the history of Polish refugees in Nyabyeya. I can also reveal that, in the aftermath

living in Uganda.

According to preliminary data published by Poland's ministry of Economic Development, Labour and Technology last year, despite the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic, Polish export to Uganda amounted to €17.4m (Shs75b) while imports stood at €10.7m (Shs46b). Uganda was Poland's 116th partner in terms of imports and 117th in terms of exports, amid a steadily improving trade partnership over the years. Uganda supplies Poland with tea, coffee and tobacco, while Polish companies mainly sell clothing, textiles, machinery and electronics to Uganda.

**Does Poland offer any direct Budget support to Uganda? If so, how much and where is it going?**

Our official development assistance to Uganda reached almost \$600,000

(Shs2.1b) last year and with the adoption of the new Multiannual Development Cooperation Programme of the Republic of Poland for the years 2021-2030, we reaffirmed our commitment to further support your country on its development trajectory. We want to continue our cooperation with your government in the fields of ensuring access to affordable and quality healthcare and education, support for entrepreneurship and protection of environment.

Some of our flagship projects over the last few years include improving access to medical care for the inhabitants of Matugga, Wakiso District, and the surrounding villages, an initiative implemented in cooperation with Polish NGO InnovAid Foundation, and Polish Franciscan friars based at Munyonyo Martyrs Shrine. The newly constructed Wanda Matugga Health Centre is, named after the Polish missionary – Dr Wanda Blerńska.

**This month, Poland's one-year long presidency of the Visegrád bloc comes to an end. Does the group of four Central European countries – Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia – have any external bearing with Uganda and in what form?**

The Visegrád Group, also known as V4, was formed on February 15, 1991, soon after the fall of Communism. Its creation was motivated by the desire to eliminate the remnants of the communist bloc in Central Europe and overcome historic animosities between the neighbours, and the belief that through joint efforts it will be easier to achieve socio-economic transformation.

The V4 cooperation in Uganda is not so formalised yet, but each of the four countries has its own projects and initiatives aimed at improving the wellbeing of the Ugandan population, both regular and spe-

6,000  
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of a visit to Uganda in 2019, Polish Ministry of Culture, National Heritage and Sport has decided to renovate Our Lady Queen of Poland Catholic Church in Nyabyeya and the cemetery adjacent to it. The works will start as soon as the epidemiological situation stabilises. We hope that this project will give us a new momentum to further spread this fascinating story.

In 2022, we will celebrate the 80th anniversary of the arrival of Siberians to Uganda and similarly to previous anniversaries, we are getting ready to organise a celebration in Kojja, most probably with the participation of Polish government officials.

**Then from 1963 when Uganda-Polish diplomatic ties were formally established, what are some of the highlights of the Uganda-Poland ties over the last 58 years?**

The Embassy of Poland in Nairobi opened in 1964 as a regional post and has been responsible for cultivating and strengthening the cordial relationship between our two countries. Although there is no Polish Embassy in Uganda, since 1998 we have an Honorary Consulate in Kampala headed by Prof Ephraim Kamuntu, who is the first point of contact for Poles arriving to or

cifically aimed at addressing critical social and economic impacts of Covid-19. Each of our countries is also represented in Uganda; the Embassy of Hungary in Nairobi, for its part, has recently opened a permanent office in Kampala. This proves growing interest in bilateral cooperation with Budapest, especially in the fields of development projects and trade opportunities. Slovakia, Czech Republic and Poland all keep honorary consulates in Kampala.

**Poland has the sixth largest economy in the EU, and for that matter you qualify as a developed country/market. What lessons can Uganda/EAC draw?**

Poland's transformation is indeed a story worth telling. In my opinion, there are five possible lessons one can draw from Poland's experience. The country, while embarking into its transformation trajectory, had a shared vision, achieved by reforming both political and economic institutions. Macroeconomic stability kept inflation and debt under control. Poland opened the economy to international markets, forcing firms to become more productive and competitive, while also attracting foreign direct investments. It massively invested in education. Poland also created a market economy which generated more jobs and higher wages.

**As an ambassador accredited to six countries in the region, how often do you engage with the respective governments and are there specific issues you are concerned about?**

Although it may seem challenging, mainly due to large geographical distances between the respective capitals and Nairobi, I try to maintain regular contacts with the authorities of all six countries.

The so-called political dialogues organised by the Delegations of the European Union constitute a great opportunity to maintain and develop relationships, both bilateral, as well as between the whole European bloc and the African countries.

**Specific to Uganda, what are the issues?**

In my opinion the current dynamics of bilateral contacts shows, however, a certain deficiency and there is definitely room for improvement that is why we are now working to bring about more frequent meetings of our governments. Our trade exchange, despite a steady growth, also has great potential for further development and I hope that activities of the embassy and the Polish Trade Office, both based in Nairobi, but active on the Ugandan market too, will help to boost these trends.

**Any last word?**

We are a country that until recently was itself a beneficiary of international aid. Poland also shares a common history with most of the countries on the African continent and is well aware of the challenges lying ahead – it has never been a colonial power, on the contrary, over the centuries it has been invaded, conquered, and exploited numerous times by more powerful actors.

We emerged stronger and more resilient and today our economy is solid. As a monument to the support received over the years and wanting to pay off this debt of gratitude, we maximise these opportunities to support other countries on their path towards sustainable development and growth.

Polish ambassador Jacek Bazański. PHOTO/ COURTESY