

## National

**PRIME**

# Ugandan officials used rats to eat Covid cash

Friday, November 25, 2022



*Dr Monica Musenero, the minister of Science, Technology and Innovation. The ministry engaged in irregular Covid-related procurements. Photo/File*

By Franklin Draku

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## What you need to know:

The findings of gross abuse of Covid funds are unsurprising after the Inspectorate General of Government (IGG), the

## National

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The Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovations (MoSTI) engaged in irregular Covid-related procurements, a forensic audit by the Auditor General, Mr John Muwanga, has revealed. According to the report, the ministry provisioned Shs46m for eight specialised rats, but only bought half while local rats for which Shs10m was claimed could not be seen.

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### Ugandan Covid vaccine trial to start in 8 months

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Auditors found that the cost of the rats meant for research were bloated, no due diligence was undertaken on suppliers or to ascertain market rates before initiating procurements, leading to bleeding of public finances, and some cash was simply diverted. The report reveals that the ministry in violation of government procurement rules, contracted firms that were not prequalified to provide services.

When contacted yesterday, the Science, Technology and Innovations minister, Dr Monica Musenero, said: “The accounting officer will provide the necessary explanations.”

In an earlier response to the report by the parliamentary select committee, she denied any wrongdoing in the implementation and said all the accountability issues were already cleared by the auditor general.

## National

government's official response to fight the pandemic after its ad hoc committee spotted suspect accountabilities and sham deals.

A copy of the latest forensic audit report, which this publication has seen, shows that the Finance ministry credited Shs190b out of the Science, Technology and Innovations ministry's Shs816b revised approved budget to its account number 000230058000002 with Bank of Uganda.



The report states that Shs10b of the released funds was meant for the Innovation Fund, but about half was reallocated for the Covid response.

The ministry, according to auditors, directly received Shs31b in

## National

who had not been prequalified.

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“In addition, MoSTI incurred the procurement expenditure for the said research equipment without market price assessments, as stipulated by the procurement regulations,” the report signed by Mr Muwanga reads in part.

It added: “I noted the absence of a framework for intellectual property rights commercialisation of public funded innovations, research and development. MoSTI was required to develop the framework in partnership with Presidential Scientific Initiative on Epidemics (PRESIDE) under Article 6.4 of the Memorandum of Understanding dated September 7, 2020 between MoSTI a PRESIDE.”

Earlier this year, Parliament’s select committee on Science, Technology and Innovation investigated allegations of corruption against Dr Musenero, the MoSTI minister, and recommended that PRESIDE be disbanded over gross irregularities.

The committee noted that although PRESIDE was established to spearhead the pathogen economy, its operations had been stymied by mismanagement, poor accountability and overall poor planning.

## National

Lawmakers said the government failed to define the initiative's legality, analyse and optimise the structures that were already established and build on them for effective functioning.

At the time, the committee reported that Shs2.6b disbursed under PRESIDE remained unaccounted for due to poor management.

The latest forensic audit details similar anomalies with MoSTI's Covid-related expenses. The pandemic, which paralysed the world, struck in Uganda in March 2000, leading to two nationwide lockdowns; in March 2020 and June 2021.

It has so far killed 3,630 people in Uganda, according to official statistics.

Now as the audit report reveals, whereas citizens were marooned under a stay-at-home order that security forces fiercely enforced and businesses atrophied, bureaucrats across government with access to public resources pooled to fight the pandemic repeatedly

## National

wasted a lot of the money, with unearthed irregularities including several contracts being given to firms owned by the same people, spending on unutilised goods and services, and unexplained budget overruns.

The auditors found in some cases that the Health ministry, which on Wednesday reserved its comments until analysing the audit findings, had made double payments for the same services or paid money to firms for no work done.

During the period under review, financial years 2019/2020 and 2020/2021, the Health ministry received supplementary budgets totalling Shs372.8 billion in addition to \$15.1 million and Shs788

## National

or misappropriated. The audit flagged a number of anomalies including flawed procurement processes, non-compliance with procurement laws, payments for ‘ghost’ goods and services, as well as double payments.

For instance, the Ministry spent Shs37.5 billion on buying intensive care unit equipment which was not installed in Gulu and Jinja referral hospitals due to a lack of space.

The forensic audit also found problems with the purchase and rollout of vaccines. As was the case with the Health ministry, the forensic audit discovered similar irregularities with MoSTI, whose accounting functions were last year moved under State House comptroller and dozens of its scientists unceremoniously sent home.

The Auditor General found the ministry’s research contract committee remained idle yet its members were fully facilitated to do their work. It is not clear how procurements were done without the involvement of the research contracts committee.

According to the report, officials in the 2020/21 Financial Year diverted up to Shs2.1b to Tropical Institute of Development Innovations (TRIDI), an institute designed to influence individuals, communities, ministries and governments in the Tropics to access and use science, technology and innovations in exploration, production, processing, and manufacturing.

TRIDI is headquartered in Uganda as a non-profit.



## National

While the TRIDI project is partly funded by the government under the Innovations Fund, there was no record of authorisation of the diversion of funds to the project.

The Auditor General said the ministry expended Shs791.6m to purchase Dr Oligo DNA Synthesizer research equipment for a principal investigator under PRESIDE without delivery.

“I, however, noted that the equipment had not been delivered and installed by the supplier,” Mr Muwanga wrote.

### Rat scandal

The report took particular issues with over expenditure by the ministry where less money was budgeted, but ended up receiving more than it had budgeted for.

The report said the Lab Animal House under Makerere University, and PCR and anti-body diagnostics kits, projects which had a total approved proposed budget of Shs2.1b, instead received Shs3.8b without sufficient justification, resulting in Shs904m overpayment.

Also of concern was the procurement of rats for research. The ministry had set aside Shs48m for procurement of eight special-grade mice for the project. Each mouse was to cost Shs6m.

However, the ministry ended up paying Shs11.7m per rat, double the price.

## National

report said.

In November last year, President Museveni defended Dr Musenero and the ministry over allegations of corruption and warned that it was criminal to attack “a decorated officer” .

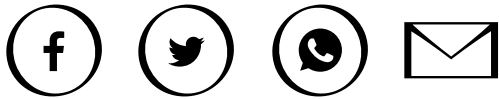
“...when I saw people attacking her, I hope they are right because if they are not right, I will go for them because you have no right to attack a decorated officer in Uganda scientific community,” he said.

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