



Access Denied: Corruption, Extortion and Fever Cartels at Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta International Airport

By Juliet Atallah



Last December, I went to Ethiopia for a networking event, the South-South Media Lab. At Bole International Airport in Addis Ababa, I must have dropped my yellow fever vaccination card somewhere; I can't be sure. So when our plane landed at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport (JKIA) on 13th December 2018, I confidently took my passport to be checked by the port health officials, who then asked me for my yellow fever certificate, right before heading to the immigration unit for my passport to be stamped. I was genuinely shocked when I couldn't find it, and then it dawned on me what must have happened. Little did I know that this would spiral into a five-hour ordeal where I would witness a ruthless extortion ring in action.

When I couldn't produce my yellow fever certificate, I was asked to step aside and take a seat with other detained passengers. Most of them were Ethiopian, Nigerian, and Kenyan citizens. Some of the Ethiopians and Nigerians actually did have yellow fever cards, but they were told that those were fake and they had to be scrutinized.

One of the port health officers then called my name, reading it from my passport. She asked me again for my yellow fever card but I still couldn't find it among my documents, and I started to

explain I must have misplaced it in Addis. She said that the only way I could get into the airport was to get another injection at \$25, which would only be payable in cash, no mobile money or credit card transaction.

I simply did not want to get another injection. I didn't need to - I had been vaccinated previously, just three months before, which gave me a 10-year immunity against the disease. I asked her to check the records at City Hall, where I had got the initial vaccination and card. If she could find my name there, then she would confirm that I had indeed got the shot. I even showed her the M-Pesa confirmation message from the Department of Health Services, Nairobi City County Government, dated 19/09/2018 when I paid and got the injection. According to the World Health Organization, the risk of sustained local transmission is considered to be minimal since the density of the competent vector, the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, in Nairobi is very low. But the government has to enforce yellow fever vaccination requirements on travellers coming into the country - particularly from high-risk tropical countries - as part of surveillance of the disease.

To my dismay, she brusquely informed me that she did not care about the records or my M-Pesa message from City Hall. She just directed me to an ATM where I could withdraw a Kenyan shilling equivalent of \$25. I then went to an airport customer service desk, where I asked if they could call Bole Airport in Addis and find out if my yellow fever card had been picked up at check-in. But she informed me that the only thing she could do was to email the Kenya Airways agents in Addis, and she wasn't sure when they would get back to her.

Feeling defeated, I went back to sit with my fellow comrades in detention, observing how other passengers from Kenya, as well as Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Nigeria were being harassed and money extorted from them in the name of having fake yellow fever certificates.

Next to me was another Kenyan citizen named Chief Nyamweya, who had also misplaced his certificate. He was even more agitated than I was, as his wife was eight months pregnant and was waiting for him at the airport parking. He became impatient with all the demands from the port health officials, until he eventually had to relent. They casually pointed him in the direction of an ATM where he could withdraw Ksh2,500 (\$25) in cash, or alternatively to the nearest M-Pesa shop where he could get it from his mobile money account. He got the money out, and then was made to wait for a nurse who would give him the injection.

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An illustration by Chief Nyamweya

Minutes dragged on, and Chief was getting extremely frustrated. Another nurse arrived, and she took him to the Port of Entry vaccination room, and after about 10 minutes he came out with a new yellow fever card. I walked with him a few meters to the exit of the immigration unit where he would have his freedom, and he was angrily muttering, "What kind of extortion is this, look how they are doing this to fellow Kenyans and Africans!" I could see tears his eyes.

I told him, "Go to your wife, she needs you, I will not leave until they get tired of me! I'll keep you posted on how it goes." He left, I went back to the detention area and kept observing the scene unfolding before me.

A family from Ethiopia - husband, wife and three children - had had all their passports confiscated, the port health officer insisting that their yellow fever cards were fake. I watched them get more and more frustrated until they paid up, \$30 per head. They got their passports back, but they were never re-vaccinated.

Then came another family from Nigeria who had also been told their cards were fake - a very agitated woman carrying a baby who looked about two years old, and her husband was much more soft-spoken. She sat next to me as her husband talked to the officials, and said, "I got this card in Nigeria, in a public hospital. They just want money, and that's fine, we will give them that. But this is so wrong. We decided to come to Kenya for our Christmas holiday before heading to the US, but this is how Kenya is treating us! I know my husband is going to pay, but I won't allow myself and my child to have another injection."

Her husband came back and told her they were demanding \$30 for each of them. The woman sucked her teeth loudly in that familiar Nollywood way as her husband went to the ATM that was just a few

meters away; he came back with an equivalent of \$100 and gave it to the officers. They handed back the passports, and the woman exclaimed, "You see! I told you all they wanted is money. I will never come back to Kenya if this is how they treat visitors." The family left without getting the injections but with their passports returned.

Then came another man from Congo, who was trying to muddle along with French-accented broken English. But a cash demand is easy to understand even with the language barrier - I observed him taking out \$30 and getting his passport back, he left and headed to baggage claim.

Soon, there were just a few of us left. I kept getting calls and text from my friends and family members, as it was my birthday and they had arranged a celebration that evening. By this time, five hours had elapsed. A few minutes to 11pm, one of the port health women called me over and handed back my passport saying, "*Nimekurudishia hii passport si kwa sababu umekataa kulipa na kupata kadi mpya, bali ni juu wewe ni mnyenyekevu, haukutusumbua kama wakenya wenzako.*" (Rough translation: I'm giving you back your passport not because you have refused to pay for the injection or get a new card but because you've been polite and humble not like other Kenyans who come here with their arrogance.)

I walked away without saying a word. She gave me back my passport simply because their shift was coming to an end and I wasn't showing any signs of giving in to their demands.

Going by the body language and offhand air of the port health officers, this is something that I suppose goes on every day at JKIA. I couldn't sleep that night - the anger and frustration kept coursing through my veins long after I got home, like the way a river leaves its scars on the landscape even after it has dried up. Being detained at the airport for more than 5 hours, in my own country, a place I call home! It is beyond disappointing.

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