



An airship flies as operators watch closely. The airship is very light as it uses Helium gas and has a maximum weight of 3 kilograms. It flies itself using robotics technology and is manned virtually to guide its flight path. [Slias Otieno, Standard]

# Firm seeks to use airship tech for medical supplies

► The airship is manufactured by South African firm Cloudline operated locally by the Kenya Flying Lab.

► It will be used to ferry medical supplies to remote villages in Kisumu and Homa Bay during its launch in September.

## GRAHAM KALILWA

**I**t is the Hindenburg disaster of 1937 that was to be the last nail on the coffin ferrying the air travel invention that brought airships to life.

And it was, at least for commercial passenger flights. Of the 97 people on board, 36 died just when the airship was approaching Lakehurst Naval Air Station in New Jersey.

The whole incident was captured on camera and broadcasted live as the airship disintegrated into flames with very little to be done to salvage the situation.

But on Thursday, some 86 years later, cameras also documented this aviation masterpiece at the Konza Technopolis Development Authority (KTTDA) grounds as an airship, manufactured by Cloudline, a South Africa firm, took to the skies in a test flight as it prepares to embark on a critical assignment – ferry medical supplies to remote areas in the Nyanza region.

The airship is being operated locally by Kenya Flying Lab.

The test flights are in preparation for the possible launch in September when the airship will be ferrying medical supplies in the remote villages of Homa Bay and Kisumu counties.

“We had better reception from the county executives,” said Cleopa

Otieno, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Kenya Flying Lab as he explained why the two counties were selected. He added that the counties also have poor indicators in terms of mother and child health.

He said the idea is to deliver medical supplies to remote areas like the islands of Remba in Lake Victoria where the only transport option there is a boat.

Airships are known to be slow, like the one that is associated with the Hindenburg disaster had spent three days crossing the Atlantic Ocean.

The idea, he says, is not to deliver emergency medical supplies, but to restock. As such, it reduces the need of emergencies when stocks run out.

“It does not have speed but has the advantage of payload and being above ground. This cuts the distance to be covered by half,” said Mr Otieno. “We are not doing emergency supplies. We could be distributing gloves, Paradol or malaria drugs.”

The airship operates just like a drone with a limited altitude, as permitted by the Kenya Civil Aviation Authority (KCAA) of 400 feet above the ground. It has a range of 50 kilometres when ferrying five kilograms of supplies.

However, this range can be extended owing to the solar panels attached to it, which will keep recharging the battery.

It is fitted with three thrusters: two at the front synonymous with a two-engine fixed wing plane and one at the back, similar to a tail rotor on a helicopter. The thrusters assist the airship in hover and cruise mode, and are powered by a battery.

The airship uses Helium gas, which is lighter than air. Hydrogen can also be used but since the 1937 incident, it is discouraged due to its flammability.

Henry Kotze, Cloudline lead software engineer, referencing on the unkind history associated with airships, said technology has given this aviation innovation a lifeline.

“Technology has evolved. We are using new technology in storage, communication and propellers. That is proof that so far that airship can fly in fair weather,” he said.

He explained that the airship is fitted with advanced technology that in case of loss of communication while on transit, it will return home.

“You can also configure it that if there is a landing site nearby, it will land in cases of emergency,” he added, noting the equipment is light. As such, even in cases of emergency landing, there will be minimal to no damage.

“Because it is light, it is very easy to control by rope as it would be like a kite. It also weighs so little so the impact on infrastructure building or people will be very minimal,” he said.

The airship has the ability to make several stops. On landing, a rope can be hooked on it for the unloading process then released once again to continue with other deliveries. The firm said once approval by KCAA is done, another airship will be added that has a winch that can just release the supplies as it moves on.

Airship mark an advancement in drone technology that African nations are slowly embracing to deal with challenges in access for medical supplies. Rwanda has used drone technology provided by a US firm known as Zipline to supply blood and blood components out of Kigali, the country’s capital.

“The good thing about airship is it needs little infrastructure where it does deliveries,” said Kotze.

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## POLITICS

# Omar, Ali differences explode in latest tussle over control of UDA

Sharp differences have emerged between East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) Member of Parliament Hassan Omar, and his erstwhile political ally and Nyali Member of Parliament Mohamed Ali over the management of United Democratic Alliance (UDA) party in Mombasa County.

In the new turn of events, Omar has drifted to former Mombasa Governor Hassan Joho’s side and has warned President William Ruto’s government not to target Joho family’s business. Meanwhile, Ali has also backed Governor Abdulswamad Nassir, who is Omar’s political nemesis.

The two politicians, who were the face of UDA in the 2022 campaigns in the county, have been trying to install members of rival groups or lineups allied to them ahead of the party’s grassroots election slated for August this year.

Reports also indicate intense rivalry related to ambitions by both Mr Omar and Mr Ali to vie for Mombasa governorship in 2027.

The two politicians have been reported to claim to have the ear of President William Ruto, including recommendations for some of the appointments in government.

Omar has been on record saying he will be the UDA Mombasa gubernatorial candidate in 2027 and is sure of wresting the seat from Mombasa Governor Abdulswamad Nassir, who he termed a one-term governor.

Addressing UDA members on Saturday, Mr Omar who is the party’s national vice chairman, bragged how his lineup led by Mutunga Wambua and Ali Kiraka will clinch the party seats come the August grassroots election.

Omar warned the party interim officials against appointing party chairmen and instead wait for the outfit’s grassroots election.

He expressed confidence in defeating Nassir by a big margin in 2027 on a UDA ticket, insisting that he is the most popular politician in Mombasa because of his past track record.

“I have been in politics for over 30 years starting as a human rights activist, politician of repute and senator. I won with a big margin,” Omar said.

But when contacted, Ali cautioned local party officials against interfering with the leadership of Mr Samir Abdalla whom he said was the party coordinator in Mombasa county.

He asked Omar to stop imposing his friends on UDA in Mombasa and instead allow for free and fair grassroots polls.

“I know he (Omar) wants to impose his friend Mutunga Wambua on UDA but my advice to him is to wait for the party’s grassroots election in August,” said Ali.

The MP warned Omar against claiming he was the most popular UDA politician in the county, wondering why he was not elected as Mombasa Governor last year despite having been given support.

“I was elected as Nyali MP on UDA which proves that I am more popular than any politician in the area. So those bragging to be popular should think twice,” said Ali.

He advised Omar against holding meetings with friends and family members at Kizingo in Mombasa thinking they are UDA forums.

“The meetings you have been hearing taking place at Kizingo are not party meetings. They are meetings with friends and family members,” said Ali.

Ali said Omar, who is a former Mombasa senator, has been holding parallel meetings at Kizingo with friends and family members and that was why party top names have not been attending those meetings.

“Where are the leaders like Karisa Nzai who is the political advisor of President William Ruto when such meetings are being held?” asked Ali.

The legislator warned Omar against maligning the names of other leaders in his meetings and told him that if he was “man enough” he should wait for the party’s grassroots election.

Samira chided Omar and asked why UDA party headquarters has been coordinating the party’s affairs through him.

“I am the one who has been accompanying Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua to various activities in the country as the representative of UDA in Mombasa,” said Samira. Samira announced that UDA party Secretary General Cleophas Malala will be in Mombasa next Saturday to meet party members in preparation for the grassroots elections.

“The leaders you are seeing at this high table are the ones who will be the party officials because I am sure they are popular enough to lead the party in the county,” said Samira.

Meanwhile, Omar dismissed those going around claiming to be party coordinators to wait for the party’s grassroots election.

Omar showered President Ruto with praise, saying he was the first president since independence to give Coastal people many appointments in his government.

Ali, who sources intimated was also eyeing a gubernatorial seat come 2027, advised Omar to stop panicking.

“It is too early to start panicking over who will be given the UDA party ticket to run for the gubernatorial seat in 2027,” said Ali.

**[Willis Oketch]**