

FIRST RESPONDER ON A MISSION

Nairobi, Kenya

Curb Road Deaths on the Nairobi-Nakuru Highway

The Nairobi-Nakuru Highway is a route that pulses with the movement of traders, transporters, and people. For many, though, it also marks a place where lives change in an instant. Frequent fatal accidents here leave victims in great need of quick medical assistance. Delays in emergency response for years meant that too many people perished before even arriving at a hospital. That is why Huduma Baada ya Ajali Barabarani pilot project was launched to bridge the gap between accident sites and life-saving medical treatment.

James Gitonga, a committed first responder with St John Ambulance, is at the heart of this project. To James, the goal is personal. Years ago, he lost a cousin in a traffic accident, not because the injuries were fatal but rather because aid arrived too late. That event irrevocably changed his life. "I understood I had to act," he says. He thus signed up without delay when the chance presented itself to join the Kinungi Community First Aid team.

James's days are unpredictable. As a lead responder, he never knows when or where the next call will originate from. The only certainty is that he has to act quickly since every second missed might make all the difference between life and death.

One such call arrived on January 4, 2025. His phone rung just past noon, an accident had happened at Nyakairo, close to Kinungi. John reached for a first aid kit from their first aid post nearby without thinking and ran to the scene with his team. The sight that met them was grim: two private vehicles had head-on collision, and the power of the accident left both vehicles badly distorted beyond recognition.



First responders in action



Road safety awareness program teaches drivers the value of safe driving techniques

A mid-thirties woman slumped over the steering wheel within the wreckage was bleeding heavily from her forehead. A six-year-old child in the rear seat was sobbing while tightly clutching his seatbelt. The second driver, a man in his late forties, was unconscious; his body limp against the deployed airbag.

James moved quickly. First, he checked the unconscious man's vital signs; his pulse was weak but consistent. Then he turned to the woman, reassuringly speaking to her in a calm, reassuring tone as he applied pressure to her wound. "You're safe now. We're here to help," he told her, even as he signaled to his colleague to remove the child. The young lad was shocked but physically uninjured. James murmured, "Your mom is okay," and offered his gloved hand for consolation.

James and his colleagues had stabilised the victims by the time the a good Samaritan came with his private car so they could use it to transfer the injured to Naivasha Sub-County Referral Hospital. He inhaled deeply, wiped his brow of sweat, and waited for the next call as the emergency car turned away. Four days later it showed up.

In the face of tragedy

This time the accident happened in Soweto. When James's squad got to the site late evening, a boda boda rider lay stretched on the tarmac with his wrecked motorcycle heap close by. A matatu had swerved to avoid a pedestrian, clipping the motorbike in the process. The cyclist struggled to breathe; his ribs possibly broken.

"You see things that linger with you some nights," James says. However, in those times you lack the luxury of doubt. You have to go past the feelings and concentrate on rescuing lives.

James bent down next to him to evaluate his injuries attentively. "Can you hear me?" he enquired. The man gave a feeble nod. He struggled every breath he drew, his chest rising asymmetrically. James realized they had to act quickly after spotting the indicators of possible internal injury. He kept the rider immobile until paramedics could safely transfer him and stabilized his neck.

The January 13 accident at Rironi was another reminder of how fragile life is. At twilight, a pedestrian had been hit while trying to cross the busy highway. By the time James got there, onlookers were gathered not sure how to assist. Taking charge of the matter, he told them to clear the area to stop more risk. The casualty had a suspected fracture shown by heavy bleeding from his leg. Before paramedics showed up, James fast used a tourniquet to stop the bleeding.

Promoting Road Safety

Beyond crisis response, James has discovered a new calling - education. Currently active both online and in person, St John Kenya's road safety awareness program teaches drivers and community

members the value of safe driving techniques and basic first aid. His most contented moment came from One day a young boda boda rider came to him and said, "Because of your teaching, I understood how to stop a friend's bleeding after an accident. He survived. As John tells the tale, he beams. "That is everything this is all about, empowering individuals to save lives."

James wants to see more community members educated in first aid, more awareness raised, and—above all—less traffic accidents as the pilot initiative advances. The highway will always be crowded, he muses. However, all the work is worth it if we can make it safer and save even one more life.

Though James Gitonga might not wear a cape, to people he has assisted he is absolutely a hero.

First responders in action



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