

# “I sleep with one eye open”



*Paramedic Nicholas Okumu is ready to handle medical emergencies, even when he retires to bed, keeping his equipment and boots nearby, just in case...*

## By Samuel Kerre

What is it like to live a life of saving lives, to crawl into bed every night knowing you could be called to an emergency?

One would expect Nicholas Okumu Owuor, a paramedic based in Nairobi County’s Kibera informal settlement, to be suffering something close to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

With the recent demonstrations in Nairobi and across Kenya, his life has been a whirlwind.

“You save the lives of demonstrators injured by police; and you save the lives of police who get hurt,” he says.

An example is Inspector David Maina, whose arms were amputated after a teargas canister exploded in his hands.

“My call is to save lives. It is a call of love, to love humanity and to seek to keep everyone alive and safe,” he says.

A week after Maina’s injury, police killed at least twenty-two unarmed youthful protestors. What does Okumu think of the police officers he has to attend to? “It can be challenging but you must stick to your role, which is to save lives,” he says with simplicity.

It can also be extremely unsafe, as when teargas is being lobbed, demonstrators are hurling stones, police are shooting rubber or live bullets – “and you have to go through the crowds to reach an injured person. You just pray that you don’t fall victim to the chaos.”

Okumu works for CFK Africa, based in the informal settlement of Kibera.

The latter, alongside Eastleigh, Mathare and Congo in Kawangware, are among

the most violent parts of Nairobi, police say. Murder, rape, carjackings are common here.

“My typical day is unpredictable. Some days I respond to a large volume of calls, other days to none at all. Whatever the case, I have to ensure I’m ready. Working in an informal settlement is especially challenging because of the number of people you have to respond to, whether it is gender-based violence (GBV), fire, assault, medical evacuation or any other. Fire outbreaks are common. His team works closely with the Fire Department and the police. CFK Africa has an ambulance 24-7.

Okumu is ever dressed for work. “I ensure my boots, uniform and equipment are ever ready.”

Okumu is accompanied by his Emergency Vehicle Operator, Walter Kibet, and Advanced Emergency Medical Technician Teresia Anyango Okello.

Sometimes he gets assaulted, as during incidents of GBV or robbery and theft. Mentally preparing for that takes its own toll. “We create rapport with the community. When they see you as a helper, you’re less likely to be caught in the crossfire,” he says. This includes chipping in financially, say, for a starving family.

Okumu is trained for several emergency situations. “My first certification was as emergency vehicle operator, then fire

fighter, emergency medical technician, which requires a certificate in paramedicine. I then upgraded to Diploma in Paramedicine before progressing to trainer for American Heart Association courses including Basic Life Support and Advanced Life Support. With that, I’m all-round so that when I respond to, for instance, a fire incident, I have the basic knowledge to put out the fire, attend to whoever needs psychological support, and other casualties.”

Okumu is qualified to deliver an expectant mother.

His first “equipment” is his mental wellbeing. “If, for instance, I’m attending to a patient who then dies, I have to go for a debrief. This helps me scrutinise and understand, as much as possible, what went wrong, if there’s anything I could have done differently, and how I’d respond the next time.”

There is the ever-present Trauma Bag, loaded with medicines and other equipment that helps him establish baseline vital signs - the random blood sugar (RBS) levels, blood pressure, and suchlike.

Once he has stabilised the patient, he calls for an ambulance, which is so well-equipped it could pass for a mini mobile hospital.

Indeed, paramedics, like Okumu are the unsung heroes of the critical medical emergency ecosystem.