

Peak Season is here; Can Kenya's Shipping System Withstand the Strain?

Every year, the global shipping calendar has its heartbeat: the peak season. In East Africa, this typically runs from late July to October, as importers race to stock up for pre-Christmas and back-to-school demand. It's a period marked by surging trade volumes, stretched supply chains, and ports across the globe being tested on their capacity to deliver.

In Kenya, the question is no longer simply whether we are ready. It is whether our system can withstand the pressures already showing. Even before the seasonal rush takes full shape, congestion is creeping in. Terminals are stretched, yard space is shrinking, and vessel schedules are beginning to wobble. If this picture holds, the coming weeks could bring even greater disruption. Last year's vessel bunching and long delays exposed just how vulnerable our systems are and this year, the stakes are much higher.

New hurdles are emerging in the shipping sector. Tariff adjustments and fresh levies from agencies are piling additional cost and complexity onto traders. While designed to regulate or raise revenue, such measures risk slowing processes and worsening congestion at a time when speed and predictability are most critical.

For many importers and exporters, the real sting lies not only in higher costs but also in the uncertainty of shifting rules layered onto an already volatile market. In such an environment, even well-intentioned policies may fall short. What appears sound on paper can quickly unravel when tested against the realities of geopolitical disruptions, currency fluctuations, and sudden shifts in trade flows.

Beyond Kenya's borders, global dynamics are adding to the turbulence. Geopolitical tremors in the Red Sea continue to reroute cargo flows, while tariff wars are redrawing trade lanes diverting fresh demand into East Africa but unsettling long-standing patterns. Meanwhile, regional rivals are not sitting idle. Dar es Salaam is gaining ground, Mogadishu is attracting new investment, and other ports are moving fast to position themselves as viable alternatives. Kenya must guard its strategic edge or risk losing ground.

Resilience is what matters most. While Mombasa remains the main gateway for Kenya's and East/Central Africa trade, there is growing recognition that the country must diversify. Lamu, though still emerging and awaiting the full reinstatement of its status, remains a viable option. The goal is not to replace Port of Mombasa, but to build the capacity and flexibility needed to absorb shocks, smooth cargo flows, and secure Kenya's role as the region's logistics hub.

With terminals congested and CFS facilities running over capacity, cargo dwell times are rising and the risk of delays is increasing. This sets off a domino effect, leading to vessel bunching, higher storage costs, and reduced efficiency across the supply chain. For traders,

this translates into unpredictable delivery timelines and mounting financial pressure. For shipping lines, it results in longer turnaround times, higher operating costs, revenue losses, and the added burden of scheduling headaches. If left unchecked, such strain could undermine the very competitiveness Kenya depends on to retain its status as a regional hub.

The warning signs are clear: congestion today is a preview of tomorrow's disruption. Unless the system adapts by streamlining charges, reducing trade barriers and bureaucracy, improving port efficiency, and sharpening regional competitiveness, this year's peak season could magnify the very vulnerabilities exposed last year. Kenya's shipping sector now stands at a crossroads: act decisively to reinforce resilience, or risk watching its hard-earned position slip away in the turbulence of global trade.