RESPONSE BY THE MINISTER OF STATE FOR MINERAL DEVELOPMENT TO THE ISSUE RAISED BY HON NAJJUMA SARAH, NAKASEKE DISTRICT WOMAN MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT REGARDING ESCALATING FATALITIES DUE TO FALLEN ELECTRIC POLES AND SAGGING ELECTRIC WIRES AND THE UNRELIABLE EMERGENCY RESPONSE BY UMEME LIMITED

1. Background
Rt. Honorable Speaker and members, at the 39th sitting of the 1st Meeting of the 4th session of the 10th Parliament of Uganda, held on Tuesday 1st October 2019, Hon. Najjuma Sarah (MP Nakaseke) raised concern over the escalating fatalities due to fallen electric poles and sagging electric wires and the unreliable emergency response by Umeme.

2. Response
Honorable Speaker and members, I wish to make the following statement on the matter.

Supply of safe and reliable electricity remains Umeme’s number one priority. They aim for zero harm to their staff, contractors and the general public, arising from supply of electricity.

The Energy Sector continues to educate customers and the general public on the responsible use of electricity and its dangers. Over the period, the level of accidents continues to reduce, despite the fivefold increase in customer connections to 1.4 million and the doubling in the size of the network.

Despite the improvements, unfortunately, fatalities continue to be registered arising out of contact with the network, illegal connections (power theft), internal wiring and construction of structures within the proximity of electricity distribution lines.

3. The Nakaseke Incident
With regret that on October 1st 2019, Mr. Robert Kiwanuka was found dead on the ground lying beside broken electric wires in Nakaseke. This was after a heavy down pour on 30th September 2019 that led to the leaning of a Medium Voltage line (MV), which got into contact with a Low Voltage (LV) network that had been isolated
following breakage of one rotten pole. Preliminary investigations have revealed that the MV line energized the isolated LV line leading to the electrocution of Mr. Robert Kiwanuka, on contact with the conductors. Investigations are nearing completion to further establish the details of the fatality.

4. Safety Improvement Strategy

a. Public Sensitization
Umeme is running a public communication program that seeks to educate the public about the dangers of power theft, vandalism, and what to do should members of the public see power lines on the ground.

Umeme will continue with its mass public education on the responsible use of electricity and its underlying dangers, through radio, TV and Online media platforms. They equally target schools and community engagements, in addition to involving local leaders in safety sensitization.

They appreciate the involvement of opinion leaders in participating in public sensitization and commend MPs that have supported the company in community engagement in that area.

b. Refurbishment of Distribution Infrastructure
Regarding the state of the network, Umeme has undertaken major works on the refurbishment of the Medium Voltage networks and substations which are now in a much better shape. Following discussions and engagements with the Electricity Regulatory Authority (ERA), they are embarking on the refurbishment of the LV network through capital investments and normal repairs and maintenance. ERA has approved resources to execute these works. Umeme runs a network inspection program which drives the network maintenance program. High priority is given to network assets that pose a safety risk to the public.

They have extended their operating footprint closer to customers through the opening of 8 new centres across the country. Four more offices in Busia, Kumi, Mpiigi and Luwero are to be opened in due course.
c. **Emergency Response**
Umeme operates a call centre that runs 24/7 where the public can report emergencies on toll free lines (0800285285 and 0800385385). Umeme responds to such calls in less than 20 minutes to isolate the affected section of the line and render it safe. Where it is not possible to reach the actual site quickly, the line is switched off remotely from the Control Centre. Unfortunately, illegal operators sometimes reconnect these lines and accidents are registered.

d. **Anti - Power Theft Initiative**
Umeme is running a power theft reduction initiative. They have to this end enlisted the services of the Uganda Police Force to help in apprehending identified power thieves. What has been observed is that the electrocution victims are women and children and not the actual perpetrators of the vice of illegal power connections. Community sweeps are ongoing in Mbale, Wandegeya, Natete, Najja, Kabalagala, Masaka among others. We appreciate the unwavering support of the Uganda Police Force in tackling power theft and vandalism of electricity infrastructure.

e. **Ready Boards (boards with a point for lighting and a point for a socket) for Low Cost Connections**
Umeme has just completed a $1m World Bank funded project connecting 15 000 customers using ready boards, targeting slum areas where the problems of power theft and poor house wiring are prevalent. Ready Boards provide a cheaper but safer way of wiring a house. The government is committed to provide US$ 5m of funding to continue with the rollout of this programme.

f. **ECP – Electricity Connections Policy**
The government has committed to fund connection costs for new customers. This will lessen the burden and ease the process of the public accessing grid power. We encourage the public to take advantage of this initiative and desist from illegal connections that pose safety dangers to the public. Umeme targets to connect 250,000 customers in the 2019/20 financial year.
In Conclusion
Umeme remains committed to ensuring staff, contractor and public safety remain a priority and at a core of its operations. Umeme will continue to implement their strategy and learn from safety incidents to improve on their strategy and future approaches.

We appeal for the continued support of MPs, community leaders and the general public in sensitization and reporting of unsafe network conditions, especially during the rainy season.

Umeme has toll free lines on which emergency situations can be reported and these lines are 0800 285285 or 0800 385385.

I submit.

Dr. Peter T. Lokeris (MP)
MINISTER OF STATE FOR MINERAL DEVELOPMENT