President Paul Kagame has defended Rwanda’s tough crackdown on alcoholic beverages, saying the government’s first responsibility is to protect its people from illicit alcoholic products that have caused deaths and serious illness.

Speaking at a press conference in Kigali, Kagame said the discussion around alcohol should start with the harm being caused to consumers, rather than the interests of manufacturers and traders

“We should now include what we observed: alcohol that has killed people. We should start from there,” he said.

His comments come as Rwanda’s crackdown has spilled into a wider regional dispute, with Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania raising concerns over restrictions on some of their alcoholic products.

> Rwanda suspended the importation and sale of more than 52 foreign alcoholic beverage brands earlier this month, citing public health and safety concerns. Kenya’s standards regulator has defended affected Kenyan products, saying they meet the required standards, while Uganda’s standards agency has said 10 restricted Ugandan brands are certified under East African Community standards.

The dispute has raised questions about how Rwanda’s public health measures fit with East African trade rules, particularly when products have been certified under common regional standards.

But Kagame said Rwanda could not stand by while people die.

“Alcohol kills people,” he said, pointing to deaths recorded in different parts of the country.

Health Minister Dr Sabin Nsanzimana previously reported that more than 500 people had been treated in hospitals after consuming unsafe alcoholic beverages between January and June this year, with about 50 deaths recorded. More than 100 people were also reported to have suffered permanent loss of eyesight.

Kagame said those health consequences had to come before concerns about the alcohol beverage industry.

“Before I go to industries, let us first answer the issue of the people,” he said. “That is the health we have to look at first.”

He also stressed that the problem was not limited to alcohol produced inside Rwanda.

“The beverages which kill people are not manufactured in Rwanda alone, but also outside Rwanda,” he said.

Kagame questioned why anyone would defend products that repeatedly cause harm.

The crackdown has already gone beyond manufacturers and traders. More than 100 people have been detained in connection with suspected illicit alcohol offences, while authorities have shut down non-compliant production facilities and seized large quantities of alcohol and ethanol.

The investigation has also reached the regulatory system itself.

The Rwanda Investigation Bureau has arrested Rwanda Food and Drugs Authority Director General Prof Bienvenu Emile and other officials from Rwanda FDA, Rwanda Standards Board and local government. RIB says the investigation is examining alleged failures in licensing, inspection and certification.

Kagame said the government would continue to act against people responsible for putting unsafe products on the market.

“A country should not stand by when citizens are dying,” Kagame said.

He added that, as head of state, he was responsible for what happens in the country and warned that those who place themselves above the law would face action from the relevant authorities.

Regional tensions

The crackdown has also created a difficult issue for Rwanda as it seeks to deepen trade within the East African Community.

Kenya’s Bureau of Standards said products affected by Rwanda’s restrictions had undergone certification, factory inspections and laboratory testing. Uganda’s

National Bureau of Standards has similarly said the affected brands comply with applicable EAC standards and questioned the basis for keeping the restrictions in place.

The disagreement has moved the alcohol debate beyond Rwanda’s public health crisis. It is now also about how East African countries should handle products that one country considers unsafe while another considers them compliant with regional standards.

Kagame said such concerns would not weaken Rwanda’s response.

Asked about the arrests, seizures and bans, he described them as a relatively small issue compared with the wider problem that needs to be addressed.

“If that is a problem, that is a small problem compared to what has to be solved,” he said.

He added that authorities could change how enforcement is carried out where necessary, but that this should not derail the fight against illicit alcohol.

For Rwanda, the challenge is now twofold: tackling a growing public health concern at home while defending its restrictions to regional neighbours whose products and regulators have come under scrutiny.

The disagreement is likely to keep attention on whether Rwanda can provide enough technical evidence to support the restrictions while maintaining its position that protecting consumers must come first.