How Rwanda depends on a complex network of oil it doesn’t control

Every single drop of fuel pumped into a car or motorcycle in Rwanda has travelled thousands of miles across oceans and continents. It has been extracted from the deserts of the Gulf, refined in India, shipped over vast oceans, and hauled in heavy tankers across congested East African road corridors.

By the time it’s poured inside a tank at any local fuel station, it carries the physical weight of a complex global network. With no oil fields, no domestic refineries, and no pipeline connecting to the coast, energy security here isn’t just a matter of watching global prices. It is a relentless, high-stakes logistical balancing act played out every single day.

When global tensions flare and demand spikes unexpectedly, the liability of being at the very end of that long supply chain quickly becomes a stark reality. Behind the price tags at the pump lies a complex international web.

Across Oceans

The story of Fuel reaching Rwanda is a fascinating exercise in global geography. According to World Bank statistics, nearly 40 per cent of the petroleum that keeps the country moving is financially brokered through the United Arab Emirates. Another 15 per cent is tied directly to the energy giants of Saudi Arabia, while roughly 10 per cent comes out of the massive, hyper-efficient refining complexes of India.

Annually, this amounts to approximately 730 million to 912 million litres.

Even landlocked Switzerland claims a six per cent stake in our trade books, not because they are drilling oil in the Alps, but because Swiss- based commodity trading houses are the ones financing and managing the complex contracts before fuel starts to move.

Regardless of whose stamp is on the financial paperwork, the physical commodity arriving at Rwanda’s borders is highly specific.

Over half of all fuel imported in Rwanda is automotive diesel, the literal lifeblood of our logistics, construction, and industrial sectors and everyday public transport systems.

The rest is split between petrol that fuels private vehicles, industrial oil and taxi-motos, and the specialised jet fuel that keeps industries and RwandAir aloft.

The Import Grid

To understand why fuel prices move the way they do, we have to look past the global oil headlines and trace the actual mechanics of the supply grid. All Rwanda’s petroleum needs are imported as fully refined liquids, primarily Premium Motor Spirit (Petrol), Automotive Gasoil (Diesel), and Jet A-1 (Aviation Fuel).

UN Comtrade data shows that the majority of Rwanda’s oil products originate in the Middle East, with the United Arab Emirates as the dominant partner at 48.30%, followed by Saudi Arabia at 16.20% and Oman at 5.40%. Switzerland accounts for a significant 14.20%.

Imports from India account for 7.00%, alongside smaller shares from Singapore (2.90%) and Malaysia (1.40%)—the rest is sourced from East African neighbours such as Kenya and Tanzania.

When trade data attributes imports to countries like Switzerland or Singapore under what is called paper or merchant trading, it shifts the nature of global trade, in which physical commodities never lands in those countries.

Switzerland acts as the world’s commercial switchboard. The oil moves from country A to B, but the invoice goes through Switzerland.

The oil journey

While contracts are signed with Dubai or Swiss traders, the physical refined products enter Rwanda exclusively through two overland transport corridors from the Indian Ocean ports. The Central Corridor from Dar es Salaam passes through the Tanzania-Rusumo border and accounts for over 35.8% of total inbound cargo traffic.

The Northern Corridor, which runs through Mombasa in Kenya, passes through Uganda, entering via the Gatuna or Kagitumba border posts, and handles at least

27.1% of this regional logistics pipeline.

Furthermore, these imports must meet strict environmental metrics before they are cleared. The Rwanda Standards Board (RSB) enforces a rigorous 50 parts per million (ppm) sulfur cap for both petrol and diesel to protect urban air quality, alongside strict density and octane rules to ensure engines perform efficiently.

When regional or international bottlenecks threaten this fragile flow, Rwanda’s primary defence is its physical storage infrastructure.

Currently, Rwanda maintains a collective national storage capacity of 118 million litres split across a network of public and private strategic depots.

This 118-million litre reserve serves as a comfortable 50- to 60- day national buffer forthe country. However, when unexpected cross- border demand drives daily consumption to 3.1 million litres, that emergency lifeline shrinks to less than 38 days. Government has plans to expand storage capacity to 320 million litres.

This shrinking buffer explains why the Rwanda Utilities Regulator Authority (RURA) had to act so decisively this year when the war in the Middle East started.

The latest June 5, 2026, RURA revised retail pump price put diesel at Rwf.2,927 per litre catching up petrol prices which have been previously revised twice since the Iran conflict. The changes reflect developments in global oil markets as well as supply-side conditions affecting fuel importation and distribution.

Prime Minister Justin Nsengiyumva said, “The increase is driven by global oil market shocks, especially instability in the Middle East. However, transport fares and essential services must not rise because of global shocks. He said government was subsidising about 18% of the cost of diesel to protect citizens from the full impact of global price increases.”

Eric Mutaganda, Chairperson of ASSIMPER, the association representing petroleum products importers, noted that soaring global fuel prices have sharply increased the financial resources needed to sustain current import levels.

“If the price has gone up more than five times, that means you need to increase your capital at the same level to be able to continue importing the same quantity,” he said.

Rwanda does not consume every drop of the $671 million in fuel imported every year, re-exporting some to Eastern DRC.

In the final quarter of 2025 alone, Rwanda re-exported about $56.85 million in oil. While petrol and diesel grab the headlines, liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) has quietly become vital to Rwanda's energy mix. Sourced through the same way as oil, it now powers kitchens in homes, hotels, and schools. Yet, like any petroleum product, cooking gas remains entirely at the mercy of global price swings and regional transit hiccups.

Even though Rwanda imports refined products rather than crude oil, local costs are tightly anchored to Brent Crude. When Middle East tensions or production cuts squeeze global markets, refiners and international traders immediately pass those costs down the chain.

Brent crude hovered comfortably below $75 a barrel for most of 2025, but repeated geopolitical flashpoints have triggered damaging price spikes. However, even minor global ripples add millions to the national import bill, inevitably hitting local consumers at the pump.

Sitting at the very end of the supply chain, every drop of fuel used in Rwanda requires a high-stakes logistical balancing act. When geopolitical tensions erupt, the shockwaves hit home immediately, as proven by recent price hikes and the long-term fix hinges entirely on infrastructure.