Rwanda’s crackdown on dangerous alcohol has now reached the offices of the people who were supposed to keep it off the shelves.

The Rwanda Investigation Bureau (RIB) has arrested Rwanda Food and Drugs Authority (Rwanda FDA) Director General Prof. Emile Bienvenu, along with other officials from the FDA, Rwanda Standards Board (RSB) and local government.

RIB confirmed the arrests on Thursday, August 13, saying they were part of an ongoing investigation into the production, approval, distribution and sale of illicit and substandard alcoholic drinks.

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The suspects were presented to the media at RIB headquarters in Kimihurura. They did not speak to journalists.

RIB spokesperson Thierry Murangira said **97 case files linked to illicit alcohol offences had been sent to prosecution since July 2.**

He said some public officials are accused of abusing their positions for personal gain, while others allegedly helped companies produce alcoholic drinks that failed to meet required standards.

The investigation has also uncovered alleged weaknesses in the licensing and inspection system. Some local officials are accused of issuing certificates to businesses that did not meet the necessary requirements, while investigators found companies operating without complying with Good Manufacturing Practices.

In some cases, Murangira said, companies appeared legitimate on paper but were producing alcohol in unhygienic conditions.

Investigators also found irregularities in product registration. Some manufacturers registered particular products with authorities but later produced additional drinks that had not been registered.

Those findings raise a difficult question: if these products were unsafe, how did they get through the regulatory system in the first place?

The question comes as Rwanda deals with the fallout from a nationwide crackdown on illicit alcohol.

More than 130 non-compliant manufacturing facilities have been shut down, while joint operations around Kigali have led to the destruction of more than 470,000 litres of ethanol. More than 100 suspects have also been detained.

Health authorities say the crisis has taken a heavy toll. More than 50 people have died after consuming illicit alcohol in the first seven months of 2026, while more than 100 others have suffered vision loss. Hundreds more have required medical treatment.

The investigation is therefore moving beyond brewers, factory owners and traders. It is now examining the officials who were expected to regulate the industry.

For officials convicted of abusing their authority, Murangira said the offences carry prison sentences of between seven and 10 years and fines ranging from Rwf5 million to Rwf10 million.

But the crackdown is not only being felt by manufacturers and regulators. Small businesses caught with recalled products are also counting their losses.

Two shop owners and three bar owners interviewed by *Rwanda Dispatch* said they are now worried about what happens to the stock they bought before the government announced the recall…Their question is simple: who will bear the loss?

They said authorities have recorded their names and businesses as part of the enforcement, but they have not been told whether manufacturers or distributors will refund them for alcoholic products that have been seized or recalled.

“We bought this stock legally. If the government is recalling it, who is going to pay us back?” one business owner who preferred not to be named asked.

For small traders, the issue goes beyond the bottles sitting on their shelves. The recalled products represent money already spent, and for some, the losses could affect their ability to restock and keep their businesses running.

The traders said they support efforts to remove unsafe alcohol from the market, but want clarity on what happens to businesses that bought the products before they were declared unsafe.

The uncertainty over who is responsible for the recalled stock is being matched by a wider disagreement over whether some of the products should have been banned in the first place.

Kenya has challenged Rwanda’s decision…saying its own tests found that the products met the required quality and safety standards.

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That has given Rwanda’s alcohol crisis a regional dimension and raised further questions about how alcoholic products, whether made locally or imported, are tested, certified and cleared for sale.

For Rwanda FDA, the arrest of its director general marks a dramatic turn in a crackdown that began with illicit brewers and bars.

The question now is not only who made or sold the dangerous alcohol, but who was supposed to stop it, and whether the system failed the very people it was designed to protect.