

Tanzania: albinos are “a walking deal”

15 June 2010

By Anne Wanjiru, in Ruvu, Bagamoyo, Tanzania

A problem that was originally confined to the Great Lakes region of Tanganyika is now spreading into mainland Tanzania. Two of the recent attacks on albinos took place less than 300 kilometres from the city of Dar es Salaam. The situation has been further aggravated by an increase in the value of a complete set of albino body parts – now fetching 200,000 US dollars.

Baby Fatuma cries loudly for her mother. She resists being picked up by Hamis Ngomera, chairman of the Albino Association of Tanzania in Bagamoyo district and a Red Cross volunteer. He is accompanying us to Mlandiyi village where the youngest albino victim in Tanzania lives – baby Fatuma.

Fatuma’s mother, Rukia Khalfani, tells us that one-year-old Fatuma refuses to let anyone else carry her since the brutal attack on the night of 7 February that took place just outside their hut. The fact that baby Fatuma is traumatized is as evident as the huge scars on her leg.

Rukia recalls how that fateful night she had strapped Fatuma on her back as she went about her evening chores. She then felt a hard blow on her left rib. She quickly turned around only to see a man trying to hide a machete behind his back.

The baby wailed and Rukia immediately knew she had to run to save both their lives. The attacker followed, hacking again at baby Fatuma’s leg with a second blow. Rukia screamed to alert her neighbours. The attacker brought the machete down hard on her forehead and she passed out.

With a shaky voice Rukia tells how she came to understand that her husband was behind the attack.

“I screamed for my husband to come out and save us, but he never even stepped out of the house. He has since disappeared and has not been in touch to find out how the baby is doing. He was arrested and held for a week, but was then released,” says Rukia.

The body parts trade

According to the Albino Association of Tanzania, the price for a complete set of albino body parts – comprising limbs, genitals, ears, tongue, hair and blood – has gone up from 75,000 US dollars to 200,000 US dollars. Although only a small percentage of that money goes into the pockets of the killers, some of the poorest are seeing this as a ‘trade’, an easy way of earning money. It seems that Rukia’s husband may have been one of them.

“If the belief is that albino parts bring luck in life and love, then we albinos would also be rich. We would sell our own hair and blood, and even cut off a finger or two. But these are complete lies peddled by unscrupulous witch doctors wanting to make quick money,” says Hamis.

Luckily, both Fatuma and Rukia survived the attack. Fatuma’s leg was saved with 18 stitches to the thigh. The entire village was shocked and they donated money to build Rukia a house where she now lives with her two children and parents.

“A walking deal”

“A few months before the incident, I started to feel tense whenever I walked to the market or to the area where I burn charcoal to sell. Some men would chant *Huyo ni deali* (that’s a walking deal). It was very distressing,” she tells me.

She is now terrified of even going out to her backyard to tend her small garden. She no longer burns charcoal to sell and depends on her parents and community handouts.

“Now, every new story about albino attacks is just mental torture. You cannot help but wonder, ‘will it be me next?’. By dusk you don’t want to be anywhere else but at home,” says Hamis, an albino himself.

As a Red Cross volunteer, Hamis faces these fears and works to raise awareness within communities on what albinism really means. He is optimistic that “with increased education, this vice will end”.

In Rukia’s home hangs a poster printed by [Under the Same Sun](#), a Canadian-based organization that fights for the rights and protection of albinos. The poster shows photos of albinos from other nations across the globe and reads: Albinism worldwide: We are not alone.

“When I look at all these photos of people with albinism in countries all over the world, I feel I am not so alone. One day this terrible discrimination will end. Someone will speak out and this madness will stop.”

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