

Surprise of Tanzania's albino MP

Tanzania's first albino MP has told the BBC of her surprise at being nominated by the president - and her determination to fight the discrimination that she and other people with albinism suffer.

Twenty people with albinism have been murdered in the past year in Tanzania, where there is a widespread belief that the condition is the result of a curse.

But a crackdown on the witch doctors who encourage the killing of people with albinism was recently announced - and as part of this, 48-year-old Al-Shymaa Kway-Geer was appointed.

"It was something very great for me - I didn't expect it," Ms Kway-Geer told BBC World Service's Outlook programme.

"I think the president chose me because he believed in me - I'm a very hard-working woman.

"The president chose me at this time, when albinos are being killed and abused."

The BBC's Vicky Ntetema in Dar-es-Salaam said that people were "amazed" when the president made the surprise announcement of Ms Kway-Geer's appointment.

'Zeru'

Instead of having dark skin and black hair, people with albinism are blond with pale skin, because their skin lacks pigment.

As well as the belief that albinism is a curse, witch doctors in the country use body parts from albinos in magic potions they claim will bring people good luck or fortune.

" We must find out how many albinos there are all over Tanzania, so that they get education and health "

Al-Shymaa Kway-Geer

Ms Kway-Geer was herself victimised when young.

"When I was at primary school, people used to laugh at me, tease me - some didn't even like to touch me, saying that if they touched me they would get this colour," she said.

"People used to abuse me on the road when I took the buses to school. They would run after me - crowds of kids following me - shouting 'zeru, zeru'."

"Zeru" is a Swahili word for albino. Tanzania's albino society says that traditionally, this is a word for ghost-like creatures and is derogatory.

Since the beginning of 2000, the word has been banned.

Ms Kway-Geer says she hopes to educate people about albinism to end the discrimination, and called for a census of albino people.

"First we must find out how many albinos there are all over Tanzania, so that they get education and health," she said.

Albinos are at particular risk from skin cancer and often suffer from poor eyesight.

"Many albinos are poor, and therefore they need help from the government," said the new MP.

Arrests

Our correspondent says that in some parts of the country, people think albinos bring bad luck to the whole community.

While there have not yet been any prosecutions regarding the recent spate of murders, 172 were last month arrested in connection to the cases - 71 of whom said they had been told by witch doctors to bring them albino body parts.

They remain in custody.

"We are still waiting to find out how far these arrests will go, and how many people will be brought to book," our correspondent says.

She adds that the police don't want to talk about the case for fear of jeopardising their enquiries.

Story from BBC NEWS:
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/africa/7348528.stm>

Published: 2008/04/30 23:36:39 GMT

© BBC MMX