

Albino United

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Tanzania's Albino Murder Crisis

FEATURES



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Over the last few years, more than 50 albinos have been murdered in Tanzania, including children and babies as young as six months old. Many more have been attacked with machetes and have had their limbs cut off.

Their attackers sell their body parts to witch doctors - for huge sums of money - to be used in potions and remedies. In one of the poorest countries in the world, it is believed that these potions can bring great wealth.

These beliefs - and the murders - are especially prevalent in the remote and rural areas of north-western Tanzania, including the fishing and mining areas of Mwanza on the shores of Lake Victoria.

Many local fishermen believe that having the hairs of an albino in their net will bring them more fish. Miners who risk their lives searching for gold and diamonds in the region's hills believe that the powdered bones of an albino can bring them more gold.

Albino genitals are made into treatments to boost sexual potency, and potions made from albino legs, hair, hands and blood are believed to make people rich.

The killings have spread into neighbouring countries, including Burundi, Kenya and Uganda. An international market demanding as much as US\$75,000 for a full set of albino body parts has reached as far as West Africa: unimaginable sums of money for the millions of people in East Africa who live on less than £2 a day.

According to Tanzanian police in the commercial capital Dar es Salaam, the murders are the work of organised gangs. The trade is so lucrative that many families have to bury their dead albino relatives in cement-sealed graves or at secret locations to protect them from grave-robbers.

The situation for Tanzania's albinos and their families seems all the more desperate amongst allegations that police have been 'bought off' to turn a blind eye to the killings.

There are signs that the tide may be starting to turn. In September 2009 a Tanzanian court sentenced three men to death for kidnapping Matatizo Dunia, a 14-year-old albino boy, from his home and murdering him. The men admitted they planned to sell his body parts to witch doctors. Many other families are still awaiting similar justice for the murders of their albino relatives.

President Jakaya Kikwete has banned all witch doctors from operating in Tanzania - although it is a difficult law to enforce - and ordered a crackdown on the trade, which has led to more arrests, including four corrupt police officers.

But the attacks continue. On 26 April 2010, attackers hacked off 13-year-old Kabula Nkalango's hand. Eight days earlier, four-year-old Naimana Daudi was murdered: she was mutilated and robbed of her left arm and leg. Eight days before that, 41-year-old farmer Said Abdallah had his left hand chopped off. He lay unconscious, bleeding for hours, and narrowly survived.

And across the border in Burundi, on 2 May 2010, four-year-old Desire Vyegura, his mother Susanna, and his non-albino father were all murdered in their home. The nine men who attacked them - using hand grenades to launch their assault - took Desire's tongue, one of his eyes, one of his arms and one of his legs, and both Susanna's arms and legs.

Albinism is estimated to be five times as common in Tanzania as it is in Europe or North America. Nevertheless, the birth of an albino child can be seen as a curse on a family for past misdeeds. The pale skin of an albino child can lead to associations with the ghostly or demonic, and albinos are derogatorily referred to as 'Zeru Zeru', which means 'nothing' or 'nobody'.

Previously, albino children were often killed at birth. More recently, they have been more likely to be kept indoors, hidden from the outside world by their families. Now, tragically, they often have to be hidden for their own safety.

But the hope provided by the convictions of Matatizo Dunia's killers, the recent appointment of Tanzania's first albino MP, Al-Shymaa Kway-Geer, and the establishment of Albino United demonstrate that attitudes in Tanzania to people with albinism must change and the killings must stop.

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