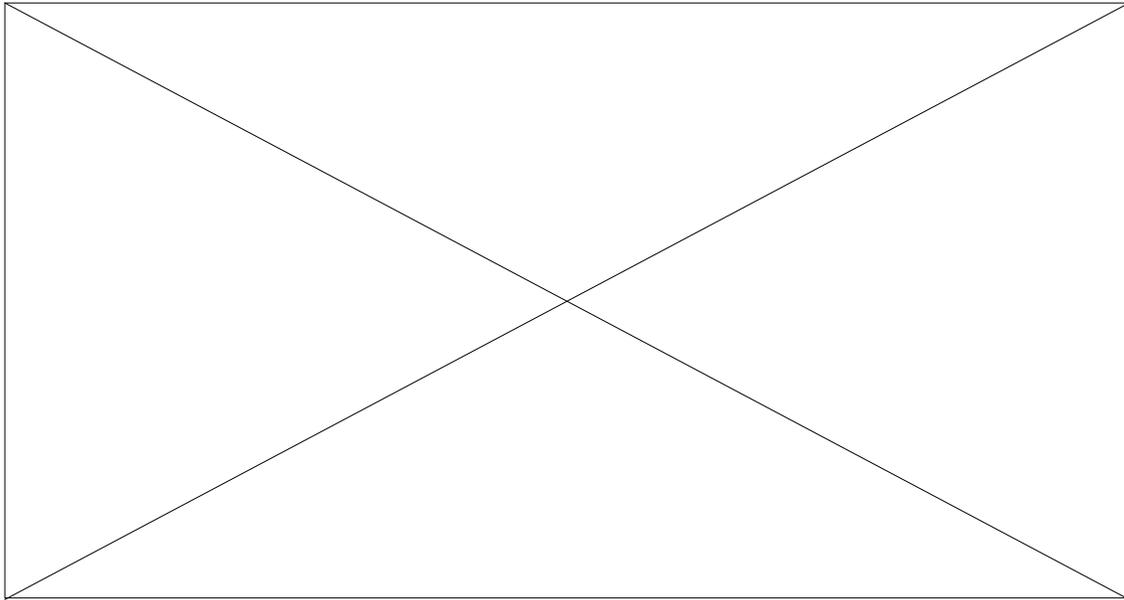




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UPDATED ON:
TUESDAY, MAY 19, 2009
15:19 MECCA TIME, 12:19 GMT

Life of fear for Tanzania's Albinos



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As part of its new Africa Uncovered series, Al Jazeera went to Tanzania and found the targeted killings of Albino citizens has shocked the country.

Susana Nyere is certain the men that murdered her husband were local.

"The killers were speaking our tribal language; they must be from here, from this village, or the villages around us, not from a far place," she says.

Rutahiro Nyerere, a 53-year-old from Tanzania's second-largest city, Mwanza, had been having dinner with his wife in late June when four men emerged from the shadows and the horrific slaughter began.

He initially invited the men to dine with him but one took out a big knife and hit him over the head.

"I ran away to the village to ask for help, when I came back with my neighbours, we found my husband dead body without legs and genitals," Susana says.

Nyere was murdered pure and simply, his wife believes, because of the colour of his skin. He was an Albino.

An estimated one in 4,000 people in Africa is an Albino. According to cancer specialist Jeff Wandu from Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania's biggest city, the skin colour is caused by a genetic defect.

"They do have a lack of gene which makes melanin, which is the black protective skin colour," he says. "So that they won't form colour. And that would include both skin and the eyes."

Discrimination

Their white skin means most Albinos in Tanzania, as in many other African countries stand out from the rest of the population and have often been discriminated against.

"While a kid, people used to call me names," Alshymaa Kwegyir, who became Tanzania's first ever Albino MP in April this year, says.

"There are names here in Tanzania, They are called 'zeru zeru', some they say this is a ghost, some they say this is not a human being, some say this is an animal, many names."

Kwegyir also says that many Albinos used to be killed in silence because people did not want to have babies with white skin.

Recently, however, prejudice in some quarters towards Albinos has taken a deadly turn, with a string of killings shocking the country.

Rutahiro Nyere was one of the latest of dozens of victims whose bodies have been found dismembered.

"There are so called witch doctors who claim that they can do something with whatever body parts they get from Albinos," Simeon Mesaki, a veteran anthropologist who studies the phenomenon of witch craft, says.



Susana Nyere says her husband's killers are local

Kwegyir says the legs, hands and hair are the three body parts that are often taken after the killing.

The legs of an albino are the most prized as they are believed to bring more wealth to miners, while hair attached to fishing nets is supposed to induce a good catch.

Stalled investigations

Mbriko Solimani of the Tanzanian police says that organ parts are taken believing it will make people rich.

As rumours have spread through the country of people becoming wealthy within a few days of using albinos' body parts, the number of killings has reached more than 20 cases in the last year.

In a society in which the majority of people suffer from poverty, corruption and poor education, superstition can find many takers.

None of the killings have occurred in the ethnically mixed city of Dar Es Salaam.

However, in the city of Mwanza on the shores of Lake Victoria, the scene of many of the killings, Albinos live in fear.

"Mwanza is still comprised of one or 2 tribes whose beliefs are the same, they don't look at the Albino as part of the community," Abdullah Omar of the Albino society in Dar es Salaam, says.

"Most of the tribes there they still have their traditional beliefs; they don't even believe that there is God."

Police investigations have led to few conclusions. Many suspects have been taken into custody but witnesses are frightened to come forward.

"We try to convince the community to bring information to the police," Solimani says. "They know the people who are committing the crime. They know they live with them. Why do they proceed to live with the criminals?"

In a country in which health care is often the preserve of city dwellers, the use of witch doctors or traditional healers is considered acceptable - even by the government.

Foreign custom

Peter Mtsegwa is the head of the witch doctor society in Mwanza says that his members are generally not involved in criminal practices but admits that not all traditional healers are entirely innocent.

"Among the members there are few of them who have been involved into these inhuman activities," he says.

"One of them had been accused by helping few killings and once we found out, we removed his certification."

Simon Mesaki believes, however, that the recent albino killings are not a native custom.

"I am 68 years old now. But previously I never heard about a deliberate killing of an Albino," he says.

"But also, I must point out that way back in 2001 there are several incidents of skinning of people's skins which allegedly was being transferred all the way through Zambia, Democratic Republic of Congo, to Cameroon and then eventually to Nigeria to be used for 'juju' or for witch craft purposes."

The rundown, sparsely staffed police station in Mwanza provides visual evidence of why the local authorities are struggling to bring the Albino killers to justice.

Similarly staff at the Albino Society in Mwanza exist on the bare minimum. They receive limited government support and no other significant means of finance.

Their work involves visiting families with Albino members to give them support or - at the very least - to provide company.

Political action

"I was shocked when I knew the news of having albino granddaughters," says Nrema Smith who has two Albino children in her family. "But later I sat down and realised that God does everything with an intention."

"There is no problem from the family level to the street level, to the whole neighbourhood. Everybody likes the girls and likes to play with them around here.

"But I am very afraid and I have a problem getting sleep at night, I am worried about the girls."

Despite the lack of support for Mrema Smith and her association, the murders are now being addressed by the highest authorities in the country.

Tanzania's political stability coupled with its stunning landscape including Mount Kilimanjaro have meant the country increasingly attracts large numbers of tourists.



Kwegyir is the first Albino member of parliament in Tanzania

Fearing the bad publicity may damage the country's economy Mrisho Kikwete, the Tanzanian president, has brought attention to the killings in his speeches and asked the whole country to stand united.

He also chose Alshimaa Kwegyir as the country's first ever Albino member of parliament to reduce the stigma.

"After being appointed MP, some people didn't believe it," Kwegyir says. "Is it Albino lady who is an MP?"

"I think those people who were giving names, now they regret of it. They regret because they see that lady now is an MP."

Abdullah Omar of the Albino society also welcomes the decision.

"It means a lot. This has shown the Tanzanian society that Albinos are just like other human beings and they can hold any position in government and then they can do the same things that others do," he says.

However, in trying to stem the wave of killings the police and government are not simply attempting to solve murder cases, they are endeavouring to change an entire, ancient culture. And this will take time.

"I know one day the killings will stop," Kwegiya says.

"I know. God will help us because we are human beings and also because we are praying. God will help us because these people are innocent."

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***Myth and Murder*, the first of Al Jazeera's *Africa Uncovered* series can be seen at the following times GMT: Friday August 1 1000 and 1400, Saturday 1730 and Sunday 2030**

The series and other Al Jazeera news and documentaries can be watched on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/user/AlJazeeraEnglish>

Source: Al Jazeera

Feedback

Number of comments : 2

SSEKATAYI ISMAIL Uganda	07/08/2008
ALBINOS	
Its a great menace to all E.Africans and the World over.The government should give enough support to these brothers and sisters of ours.This is violation of Fundamental Human Rights.The act is so barbaric and inhuman.Let the security Orgarnisations in Tz work out suitable ways of solving such crimes.Today its the albinos and they might go for people with other body deformities.Its not a crime to be an albino,they did not apply to God to be created a different skin color.We sh'ld show them love.	
Pennie McCart United States	06/09/2008
Albinos In Tanzania	
Imagine being hunted because someone thought that your legs would make them rich. People being hunted for their body parts, their skin - it is truly barbaric, a sad statement on humanity. The TZ government needs to do everything in their power to educate the public and protect the albino people from this hideous torture, bringing those who maim and murder to the full extent of the law. My heart goes out to the victims and loved ones of this hideous practice. Thank you.	