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# Through albino eyes

The plight of albino people in Africa's Great Lakes region and a Red Cross response

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Advocacy report



Cover photo: 11-year-old Tahia heard about albino murders on the radio and now stays inside her Tanzanian boarding school at all times. She says she asks her non-albino friends to play in the shade so she can join them. (Photo: Dieter Telemans/Panos)

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## Foreword

The experience of albinos in the Great Lakes region stirs some of Africa's worst memories, not to mention the stereotypes sometimes propagated outside the continent.

Yet this report, based on detailed field research in Tanzania and Burundi, shows that many ordinary villagers in remote areas have done their best to protect people among them who live with albinism and who are also their husbands, wives, parents or, most often, their children.

The world might not have heard of this story at all were it not for the extraordinary courage of one Tanzanian journalist, Vicky Ntetema, now the BBC's Dar es Salaam bureau chief, who risked her life to bring it to light.

And we have probably all been set an example by the Red Cross volunteers who, in 2008 after the first killings near Kigoma in north-west Tanzania, gave up some of their modest per diems to pay for basic items for the albino children and youngsters who had taken refuge in a local school for the disabled.

The murders have also dramatically highlighted something that, in terms of life lost, is probably a worse crisis: the skin cancer that kills many young albinos in tropical Africa. No one knows exactly how high they are, but it is certain that skin-cancer rates among albinos in the countryside are much higher than they need be for want of simple, cheap protective measures and health education.

This is where Red Cross societies and other community-based groups will continue to play a key role. It is our hope that their central role in promoting a culture of non-violence and fighting discrimination will be better recognized and supported by authorities and partners alike.

We hope that by issuing this report in Nairobi, on the occasion of the General Assembly of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, which is being held in Africa for the first time, we may be able to help keep the spotlight on this "silent emergency".

It has only just begun to be addressed.

Bekele Geleta      Salif Keita

### Authors' note

*The authors of this report would like to express their gratitude to all those, particularly in the Burundi and Tanzania Red Cross societies, who gave time and effort to make it possible. It aims to chronicle the plight of people living with albinism in the Great Lakes region and to scope the possibilities for an expanded humanitarian response. It is not an attempt to investigate the recent killings, nor an evaluation of the way governments have reacted. It is dedicated to the African Red Cross volunteers and journalists who brought this story to the world's attention.*

*Andrei Engstrand-Neacsu and Alex Wynter*

# Albinism in the Great Lakes

## Advocacy highlights

Worldwide the International Federation is committed to engaging with its member National Societies to promote a culture of non-violence and fight discrimination wherever it arises. In the Great Lakes region of Africa, the Federation sees the immediate priorities for humanitarian advocacy as these:

Governments must...

- Ensure effective legal protection for people with albinism.
- Use local administrative structures to locate albino people in hiding.
- Conduct public anti-discrimination campaigns and extend medical services to albinos in need.

Red Cross Red Crescent National Societies need support to...

- Partner with government agencies to eliminate discrimination against people with albinism.
- Provide health education for the prevention of skin cancer.
- Provide psycho-social support and vocational training.

The International Federation will...

- Provide technical support to National Societies already working with albinos in distress or in hiding.
- Assist the safe reintegration of albinos into society.
- Mobilize international support for the long-term alleviation of the plight of albinos in the Great Lakes region of Africa.

A Red Cross volunteer takes an albino child to a picnic at the Kabanga school. (IFRC)

# Introduction

The occult-based killings of albinos in eastern parts of Burundi and several regions of north-west Tanzania – the general area between Lake Tanganyika and Lake Victoria – were first brought to light by journalists, initially from Africa then from the global news media. In October 2009, at a ceremony in Stockholm, the Tanzanian journalist Richard Mgamba was awarded the Lorenzo Natali Journalism Prize for Africa for his coverage of the Great Lakes albino emergency.

Perhaps most famously, the outside world's attention was drawn to the albinos' plight by the undercover reports, produced at great risk to her life, by the BBC's Dar es Salaam bureau chief, Vicky Ntetema, herself a Tanzanian. (See box: *The reporter's story*.) Most recently, at the time of writing, the story was featured by the US ABC network in its *20/20* programme.

As this report was being drafted, a three-month lull in the albino killings in Tanzania came to an end with a brutal attack on a family in the Geita district of Mwanza region. A 10-year-old albino boy, Gasper Elikana, was killed on 21 October by hunters who fled with his leg, which they hacked off in front of his family having first beheaded him to stop him screaming. His neighbours and his black father, who was left fighting for his life in hospital, had tried bravely but unsuccessfully to protect him.

The last reported killing of an albino had been on 18 July, and the whole of Tanzania had hoped that the firm action taken – including the sentences passed on three albino hunters from the Shinyanga region convicted of the murder of 13-year-old albino schoolboy Matatizo Dunia – had finally put an end to the killings. The news of Gasper's murder caused dismay nationwide.

The official death toll now stands at 44 albinos killed in Tanzania and 12 in the eastern Burundian provinces of Cankuzo, Kirundo, Muyinga and Ruyigi – on or near the border with Tanzania. This figure for Tanzania is the

## Thousands of albinos are no longer able to move around for fear of the hunters

one given by police to the special parliamentary committee investigating the killings. Private organizations and some media in Tanzania have put the number higher, at more than 50 deaths.

Burundians – no less shocked by the killings than their Tanzanian neighbours – believe the market for albino body parts exists mainly if not exclusively in Tanzania, generated by big-money buyers who use them as talismans to bring luck and above all wealth. Senior police officers in Dar es Salaam said a complete set of albino body parts – including all four limbs, genitals, ears, tongue and nose – was fetching the equivalent of 75,000 US dollars.



Jane Chagie of the Tanzania Red Cross is a leading light in the effort to save the albinos. (IFRC)



1. Data in this report is current as of late October 2009.

After they began in 2007, the killings quickly triggered a small-scale humanitarian crisis in both countries, leaving as many as 300 young albinos abandoned or stranded in existing Tanzanian schools for the disabled like the Kabanga school (49 albinos) at Kasulu, Kigoma region, and the Mitindo school (103 albinos) at Misungwi, Mwanza region – a centre of the killings and the witchcraft practices behind them – and in emergency shelters in Burundi where many remain well after the last killing there on 14 March.<sup>1</sup>

In Burundi – a tiny country relative to Tanzania which has a land mass nearly equal to that of France and Germany together – the police were able to gather together albinos in secure urban locations and mount a 24-hour guard on them. That guard has yet to be stood down.

An undetermined number of Tanzanian albinos also reportedly clustered near police stations and churches or are, in the words of one Red Cross worker, “just hiding in their backyards”. It is impossible even to estimate the number of albinos who have been displaced. What is certain is that thousands – probably the overwhelming majority of the total population of albinos, whatever it may be – are no longer able to move around freely to work, study or tend vegetable plots for fear of the hunters.

In effect, their lives are on hold.

As of mid-September 2009, terrified albino children were continuing to arrive at the Kabanga school. The most recent arrival, seven-year-old Enus Abel, spent two weeks hiding in the bush with his black mother after hunters appeared in their village. They finally made it to Kabanga and safety on 13 September.

### The cancer patient's story

## EVODE MAPUNDA

Dar es Salaam

Until recently, Happy Mapunda would have considered herself aptly named. She lived with her albino husband, Evode, 34, in the small town of Songea, in the far south of Tanzania, where he worked as a primary school teacher – a common occupation for many albinos who manage, against the odds, to acquire an education.

Happy, 30, who is black, says her husband used to be a handsome man. Their marriage was blessed with five children, including two sets of twins, all of them black.

Now, he is lying in a ward of the national cancer hospital in Dar es Salaam, where he arrived in a critical condition after a 12-hour ambulance drive.

Fighting back tears but speaking in tribute to her much-loved husband, Happy explains that he has now had eight out of a planned ten radiotherapy sessions, but she is not sure he'll be able to finish the course.



“He’s been saying his goodbyes”

“For the last three days he hasn’t been able to eat or speak,” she says. Food and fluids just seep out of the hole in his neck made by skin cancer.

Evode, even though he is near the end, still bears an unmistakably refined, schoolmasterly air. “He’s been saying his goodbyes,” says Happy. “Just saying ‘goodbye, goodbye. Take care of the kids, say goodbye to my parents and my priest’.

“I don’t know how I’m going to manage with our children. Evode’s parents are very old themselves.”

Happy, who works a small plot near their home, recalls that when stories about the killings of albinos near the Great Lakes started to appear in their newspapers, Evode “felt threatened” and wondered aloud if they would spread south. But there were no albino murders in Songea, she says.

In albino terms, he had been one of the lucky ones, with a job indoors, out of the sun. It was not enough.

*Postscript: Evode Mapunda completed his course of radiotherapy but was discharged from Ocean Road on 12 October 2009 for terminal care in Songea.*

## ‘Noirs à la peau blanche’<sup>2</sup>

Albinism is technically a *hereditary disability*; African albinos are no different to any others in the world, though more conspicuous and they are acutely vulnerable to harsh tropical sunlight because of their lack (often total) of melanin skin-pigment. Inadequate melanin in the eye also results in poor vision, sometimes close to actual blindness, and exacerbates their vulnerability still further.

On the surface, it is difficult to cast the story of the occult-based killing of albinos in the Great Lakes region as anything but negative. It is capable of being sensationalized by the western media and has been. African albinos have been incorrectly described in western newspaper headlines as “white” and as a “tribe”, albeit above sympathetic articles.

Yet it was African journalists who broke this story and covered it diligently month after month; African specialists, like consultant oncologist Dr Jeff Luande, who are now tackling head-on the acute and often lethal health problems facing albinos (*see box: The doctor’s story*); and African National Society

### “Albinos want to stay in the sun like ordinary people”

personnel in both Burundi and Tanzania who, from a sense of moral duty, coordinated the spontaneous humanitarian response to the albino emergency using their own resources and experience, and sometimes money from their own pockets. The international humanitarian community and media are following their lead.

“Albinism and the problems linked to it make this group very vulnerable, and the Red Cross addresses all vulnerabilities,” says Peter Mlebusi, Deputy Secretary General of the Tanzania Red Cross National Society. “So albinos are ‘clients’ and in the future we see it as an area in which we should expand.”

Even before the killings began, albinos were a hidden, marginalized population, the victims of ignorance and discrimination whose precise number and location was (and still is) a mystery.

In Burundi, to an even greater extent than in Tanzania, the true number of albinos is unknown. The lack of proper census data is almost total: “We know so little,” says Kazungu Kassim, Director of Albinos Sans Frontières Burundi (ASF), and himself an albino. The best estimate anyone can give – and the one used operationally by the Burundi Red Cross – is that there are at least 1,000 albinos countrywide.

The number of officially registered albinos in Tanzania is 6,977, according to Al-Shaymaa Kwegyir, the country’s first albino Member of Parliament whom President Jakaya Mrisho Kikwete appointed (as the MP puts it herself) to “express solidarity with the albino community”. Again, some groups and media have put the number much higher than this, and it should be noted that

2. “En Afrique, il existe une sorte d’apartheid à rebours, larvée mais pernicieuse, dont sont victimes les albinos, ces ‘Noirs à la peau blanche’ [blacks with white skin].” (J. D. Mhamile et H. Yonkey)



A teenage albino girl practises typing at the Mitindo school. (IFRC)

this total includes only people who come forward *voluntarily* to register. Now, after the killing spree, this most conspicuous group of people are doing everything they possibly can to make themselves inconspicuous.

Of one idea – that because of some environmental or genetic quirk there is a disproportionate number of albinos in Tanzania – Dr Luande is happy to dispose. “That’s a myth,” he says.

The overwhelming majority of albinos who are in paid employment (a small proportion of the total) find work outdoors in the sun – the very last place they should be. This involves activities like roadside trading, market stalls, agricultural day-labour and the like. Those who aren’t in paid employment survive by tending small plots – again out in the sun.

This acute dilemma has been multiplied many times over by the killings.

Twenty-six-year-old albino Yusuf Elias says it’s really very simple: “If you don’t go in the sun, you don’t eat,” adding that for security reasons he has now been barred by elders from tending his plot a short distance away from his village near Mwanza where there was a particularly notorious murder and dismemberment of a young girl by albino hunters. Yusuf survives on the charity of his neighbours. (*See box: The villager’s story.*)

That the parents of many albinos are themselves black inevitably increases the likelihood that their desperately acute sensitivity to harsh equatorial sunlight will go unrecognized as they grow up in remote rural areas – usually developing, by a very young age, a facial rash of dark melanomas that are the precursor of the skin cancer that kills so many albinos in early adulthood.

If the battle for what in the North is called “sun safety” has only recently been won there, in sub-Saharan Africa the concept does not exist, as the testimony of Alfrede Kapole, the chairman of the Mwanza branch of Tanzania’s Albino Association makes clear: “We have tried to motivate people to go early in the morning [to cultivate] and come back before the sun gets high.

“But they [albinos] want to stay in the sun like ordinary people who work in the midday sun. So you find that because people don’t know, they will burn. And our parents just leave us like that.

“When we complain, we’ll just be told to ‘get used to it.’”

The mother's story

# MARIE NIYUKURI

Ruyigi, Burundi

The suspected albino-hunter who rode his bike straight at Marie Niyukuri's eight-year-old albino son was lucky: he was saved by the police from being lynched on the spot by her vigilant neighbours, who were jumpy since a small albino boy had been snatched and killed in the next *colline* (hill or administrative unit).



"People round here are on the alert now"

It seems the man had clumsily attempted to fake a road accident and make off with Ephreim's body, but the boy was pulled back by his non-albino friends. Police forced the attacker to pay for medical attention for Ephreim before taking the man to jail.

Marie's confidence in her neighbours seems, if anything, to have grown since albinos began being killed in August 2008. She, her husband Protais, Ephreim's 14-year-old albino sister Faustine, and their eight black siblings live on a cultivated hillside near the eastern town of Ruyigi.

The children walk three kilometres every day, unescorted, to school.

The family briefly took refuge in a shelter in town with other albinos, but the fact that

"people round here are on the alert now," Marie explains, is a large part of the reason why they returned.

Marie's other concerns for her son quickly returned once the immediate threat to his life passed. (No albino has been killed by hunters in Burundi since 14 March.)

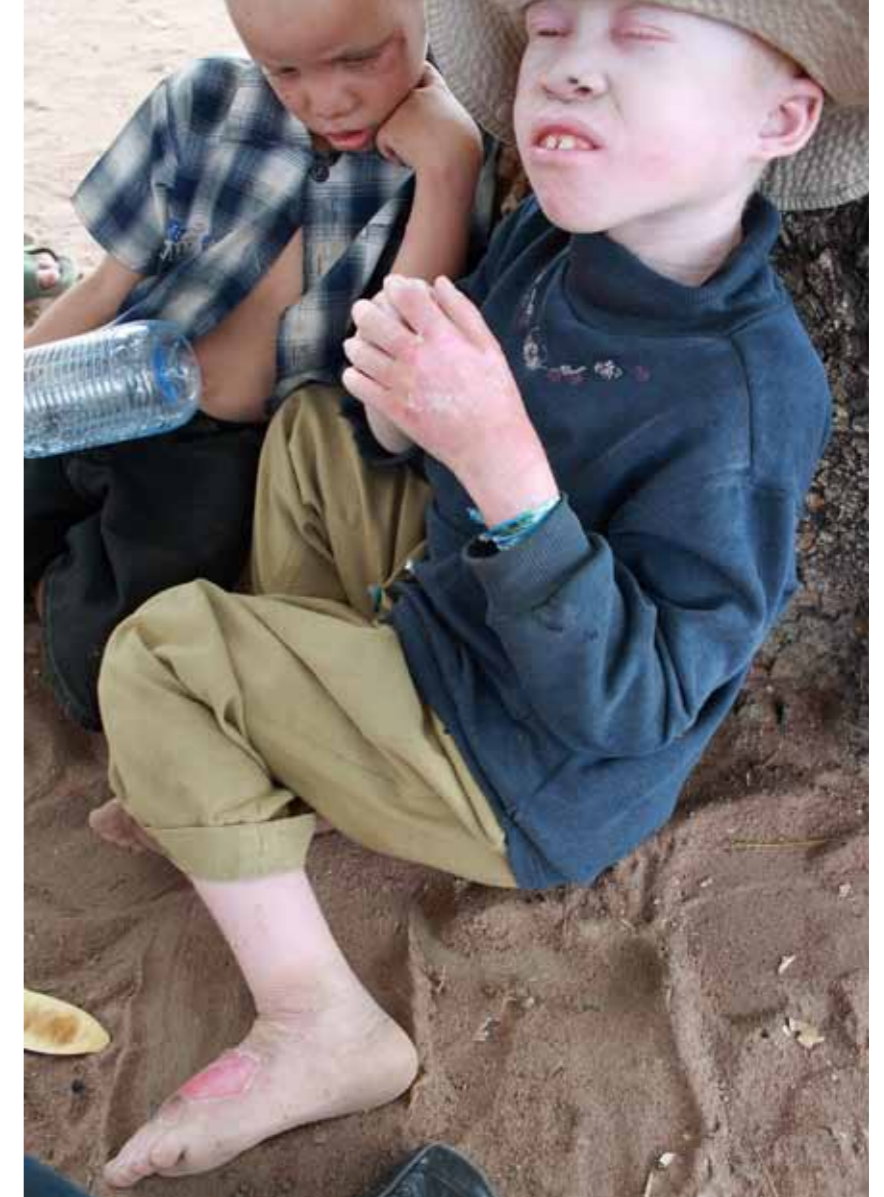
"He's struggling at school," she says. "He had to repeat his first year three times.

"While we were in the shelter and he was at school in town, the teachers put him in the front row so he could see. But not here." This is an easily rectifiable problem facing many albino children.

Marie and Protais also say their two albino children are extremely fussy eaters – something they associate with the condition – but the family's diet is monotonous, even when it's adequate.

Perhaps most seriously, neither Ephreim nor his sister Faustine, who speaks in a whisper with her head bowed, has received any medical attention for the melanomas that liberally speckle their arms and faces. And neither child owns a potentially life-saving, wide-brimmed hat.

"We got married very young," says Marie. "When I started having albino babies [their first albino child died in infancy] I was shocked and I looked for an explanation, but I gave up and accepted them and treated them the same."



A young albino boy nurses his sunburnt hands and feet. (IFRC)

Even in the special schools, where children are as well looked after as human and material resources permit, some are so badly sunburnt that they appear to have been scalded.

Al-Shaymaa points out that in the past the principal threat to the lives of albinos in the Great Lakes region, apart from skin cancer, was infanticide – often as part of a conspiracy between father and midwife. "Sometimes," she says, "women were divorced for giving birth to an albino." According to Al-Shaymaa, many other superstitions were held: "That a woman had been impregnated by a white man or laughed at during her pregnancy by an albino, or that albinos were the ghosts of European colonialists."

But on one point all concerned in both Burundi and Tanzania agree: the use of the *body parts* of murdered albinos as good-luck charms suddenly came from nowhere and seems to have been the result of a kind of marketing exercise by witch doctors, who are feeling the same economic pinch as everyone else around the world.

The humanitarian crisis of the Great Lakes *noirs à la peau blanche* is now essentially fourfold, says Peter Mlebusi. "One, it is a health problem because of the skin conditions associated with albinism. Two, we see it as a stigma and discrimination problem in the community. And three, there is the insecurity because of the mythology of the wealth that can be generated by selling parts of albino bodies."

And fourthly, he adds, "there is a legal issue because of the painfully slow process involved in dealing with the killings."

# The Red Cross response and the future

In 2008, more than 60 albino children were left at the Mitindo school by their parents in less than three months after the well-publicized killing and dismemberment of a seven-year-old local girl, Mariam Emanuel, whose brother now lives at the school. But the school, which in theory takes children aged 5 to 14, had no choice but to turn away albino babies whose parents could not stay as it simply had no way of caring for them.

Hardened Red Cross volunteers, who have spent years working in refugee camps, admit they wept when they saw the physical state of albino children after they first took refuge in the schools. Conditions at the schools remain – by any local standard and despite the best efforts of everybody involved – unacceptable.

As every parent knows, children are quite capable of frightening themselves out of their wits with their own imaginations. The mental state of those albino children who are old enough to understand the real reason for their displacement can only be guessed at.

The response of the two National Societies has been entirely unsupported externally, and based on humanitarian sentiment on the part of staff and volunteers.

Of the two Tanzanian Red Cross branches closest to the albino crisis – Kigoma and Mwanza – it's the former that, for fortuitous reasons, was best placed to offer rapid assistance to displaced and petrified albinos. For a decade, Kigoma has been the hub of a major international Red Cross operation, supported initially by the International Federation and now by the American,

## The beneficiaries in this “silent emergency” must first be found

Japanese and Spanish Red Cross, to maintain refugee camps for Burundians, Congolese and Rwandans. These operations are now winding down and the Tanzanian government hopes to close the two remaining camps soon; the branch has thus been left with spare capacity.

The Kigoma regional branch headquarters reported that they had managed to supply Kabanga with scores of beds and mattresses left over from the camps programme, as well as kitchen sets valued at 13 million Tanzanian shillings (10,000 US dollars). Before that, newly arrived albino children had been sleeping on rags on bare concrete, without mosquito nets, toiletries or any form of sun protection, while the school struggled to feed them and get them fit enough to attend classes.

3. Neither the Kabanga nor the Mitindo school has a proper kitchen. All food for both staff and children has to be cooked on open wood-fires in the yard.

### The doctor's story

## JEFF LUANDE

Dar es Salaam

Dr Jeff Luande wears his erudition very lightly. His book-lined office at the national cancer hospital in Dar es Salaam – universally known by its optimistic-sounding address, “Ocean Road” – is crammed with academic papers in waist-high piles. His manner is easy and welcoming, but supremely expert and confident.

Dr Luande, a consultant oncologist, is Tanzania's top authority on the grave humanitarian problem of the skin cancer to which so many of the country's albinos succumb.



“The purpose was to help albinos mobilize”

Since the 1970s, Dr Luande has dedicated much of his career to studying the health problems afflicting albinos. When they began to be murdered in the north-west of Tanzania and their body parts sold as talismans, no one can have been more upset than he was.

“It was a big shock to me,” he says. “Here we are, for the last 30 years, trying to improve the lot of these people and have them enjoy life like the rest of the general population...” His voice trails in dismay.

Like so many Tanzanians who have followed the story, he agrees the occult-based killings seemed to “come from nowhere”.

It was in 1978 – at the start of what must be one of the longest-running programmes of its kind in Africa – that Dr Luande looked at the results of the census held that year and concluded that only 2 per cent of albinos in the Dar area lived beyond 40. This compared to nearly 15 per cent of the general population.

The original purpose of the programme that followed was to “assist albinos to mobilize themselves into a society, help them to have a common voice and reach the rest of the community,” says Dr Luande.

“The second aim was to teach them about the problems with their skin, how to handle them, and in case they get skin cancer what services there are.

“Thirdly, we addressed the community at large – teaching them who an albino is, how they come about, what problems they have, and what the community can do for them.”

By the 1990s, in Dar es Salaam at least, where medical treatment is available, things had improved thanks to Dr Luande's programme. There is no national epidemiological data, but all the anecdotal evidence is that in the countryside albino skin-cancer rates are still very high.



Gilbert Nshimirimana of the Burundi Red Cross talks to displaced albinos under 24-hour police guard. (IFRC)

Most strikingly, in 2008, the Kigoma branch persuaded some 250 individual local donors – including officials, businessmen, Red Cross volunteers living on field allowances, expatriate delegates and UN agency staff – to donate out of their own pockets. In effect, it launched a local appeal, and the money raised was used to buy sunblock, blankets, second-hand clothes and other items to a total value of 5 million Tanzanian shillings (4,000 US dollars).

The Burundi Red Cross was also instrumental in coordinating a spontaneous humanitarian response there, which included local NGOs, UN staff, churches and schools. The Red Cross branch in Ruyigi province, for example, where the first albino killings in Burundi occurred in August 2008, collected food, clothes and cash that people had donated personally.

The branch in Ruyigi is now scoping a major humanitarian intervention in the albino crisis, which is intended to promote their long-term reintegration into society and reduce the atmosphere of vulnerability around them. “We’re forming a donor partnership with the World Lutheran Federation,” says Jean-Pierre Sinzumunsi, Burundi Red Cross regional coordinator for Ruyigi and Cankuzo provinces. “We want to help our volunteers better understand the problems of albinism, and to promote the integration and protection of albinos.

“We also aim to sensitize the local authorities, the police, the military, priests, local NGOs and village elders.”

For Jane Chagie, manager of the Western Tanzania Refugees Relief Operation and the leading light in the Tanzania Red Cross National Society’s effort to save the albinos, the humanitarian effort has probably gone as far as it can with purely local resources: “We have spare capacity here – volunteers and organizational experience, and also vehicles and office space – but we need some external support to run it and fuel it.

“Then,” Chagie adds, “the Red Cross can truly ‘take ownership’ of this desperate humanitarian problem.”

### The villager’s story

## YUSUF ELIAS

Mwanza, Tanzania

Again and again, Yusuf Elias relives the day in May 2008 when Vumilia Makoye was murdered, reducing the albino population of his village on the shore of Lake Victoria from four to three.

Vumilia, 21, was the treasurer of the local branch of the Tanzania Albino Association, of which Yusuf is still the secretary.

Vumilia and her family had started eating at around eight in the evening when Vumilia’s mother saw a flashlight outside their house. “The mother called out to ask who was there,” says Yusuf, 26. “And some men said, ‘you will know us’.” It appears one of the killers had befriended Vumilia before she left her work selling peanuts in the market.

“So the mother went to the door and they pushed it in. They all struggled, but they were two strong men and inside were only women.

“They overpowered her and the door broke. One man pinned her under the door and the other went to Vumilia, cut her throat and cut off her right foot.



“If you don’t go out in the sun, you don’t eat”

“They killed her in front of her sisters and her mother. The one who killed Vumilia said ‘Hey! I’m done, let’s go’.

“The mother started yelling and the neighbours came, but it was too late. They’d left with the right foot.”

The aftermath of this terrifying incident has made survival for the village’s albinos an even tougher challenge than it was already. The small group used to depend on a vegetable plot in the bush near the lake shore. But now, the elders have told them to abandon it because of the danger of being snatched by hunters. “The chairman says they can even come for you during the day,” says Yusuf.

“Now I just do gardening around the house. I start in the morning at daybreak and stop before it gets too dark when I make sure I’m home.”

About the other great killer of albinos, the sun, Yusuf, who never wears anything but a baseball cap, is dangerously nonchalant. He has learned to live with undiagnosed *kidonda* (a Swahili word that best translates as “open sore”) around his ears since childhood. It might turn cancerous, it might not.

“We know we are vulnerable, but there’s nothing we can do. We just have to leave it in the hands of God. If you don’t go out in the sun, you don’t eat.

“We just encourage each other to go on.”



The first step in the response to the aftermath of the killings, as with any humanitarian intervention, is to register the beneficiaries. But in this “silent emergency” they must first be found. In the current atmosphere of mortal danger, albinos in remote rural areas (still the vast majority) are only likely to reveal themselves to community-based Red Cross volunteers.



An albino child, whose hair has been dyed black, rests in her sister's arms. (IFRC)

Broadly speaking, the outstanding needs of the Great Lakes albinos can be classified as follows:

1. security<sup>4</sup>
2. health education on how to prevent skin cancer
3. protective clothing
4. eye care
5. assistance in participating in mainstream primary and secondary education
6. vocational training to maximize the chance of indoor work out of the sun
7. help with reintegration into society after displacement or time spent in hiding.

Dr Luande, Tanzania's leading authority on the skin-cancer issue facing albinos, argues convincingly that expensive, imported, high-factor sunscreen lotion is not a viable option for Africa. He draws a parallel with the (even more expensive) malaria prophylactic drugs taken by people from developed countries about to visit tropical areas. The African solution in the case of malaria, he says, is bednets. And in the case of skin cancer, it's proper *protective clothing*.

According to Dr Luande, the simple expedient of supplying albinos with wide-brimmed hats and long-sleeved tops could greatly reduce their chances of getting cancer.

There is also great scope for traditional Red Cross health education, which would be both cheap and, in all likelihood, extremely effective. Albino adults can be encouraged to tend their plots (when they feel safe enough to do so) in

## Half the albino children have such poor vision they are learning Braille

the early morning and late afternoon. Non-albino parents, who may not realize it is a medical impossibility for albinos to tan their bodies, can be discouraged from placing their albino children in direct sunshine in the hope that they will “get used to it”.

Dr Luande also points out that in mainstream schools teachers are often not aware that by seating albino children, who are often considered stupid, in the front row, they will be able to see the blackboard and their chances of educational success will be greatly improved.

The Mitindo and Kabanga schools, however, are short of just about everything associated with the accommodation and education of children, let alone children with special needs. At present, Kabanga is completely unable to offer older pupils any kind of vocational training. Mitindo school – set up as a specialist school for blind children in 1956, which began to develop expertise in the problems of albinism in 2006 – does have some manual typewriters and Braille machines supplied by the Canadian albino NGO Under the Same Sun. Both schools have a huge strain on their human and financial resources because they are now unable to close during the holidays – the albino children who have been left there have nowhere else to go.

4. This is the exclusive remit of the police, except possibly in rural Africa where neighbourhood watch committees are officially tasked to keep an eye on albino residents.

The Tanzanian Red Cross National Society is now appealing for international assistance to provide health education, wide-brimmed hats and long-sleeved tops in the countryside, and to provide vocational teaching equipment aimed equally at albinos and non-albino children in the schools. At Kabanga, for example, staff say that about half the albino children have such poor vision that they are learning Braille.

Providing assistance in the fixed locations to which young albinos have fled confronts the National Societies with a classic humanitarian dilemma: no one involved thinks the answer is to put albinos in camps and surround them with barbed wire. Mitindo's headmaster, Juma Senge Abdallah, told the International Federation he believes there is a danger, even without outside humanitarian intervention, of his school turning by stealth into a mini "refugee camp".

But there is an equally widespread consensus in Tanzania – endorsed by all the professionals consulted for this report – that the best educational arrangement for albino children is secure, integrated *boarding* schools that spare them the danger of daily travel between home and classroom through remote countryside. "That way," says Vicky Ntetema, "you make the children feel they are wanted in society, they're not isolated, there's no discrimination, no stigma, and other children understand that persons with albinism are just ordinary people." (See box: *The reporter's story.*)

On the world stage, it was very much Ntetema who opened the curtain on this wrenching human drama; and she means to see it brought to a successful conclusion.

*The reporter's story*

## VICKY NTETEMA

Dar es Salaam

Like many young Africans who returned from a university education in the old eastern bloc, Vicky Ntetema – who still speaks fluent Russian – was told in the 1980s that she was over-qualified for the sort of job she was in line for.

But return she did. "I felt I had to give something back in exchange for the opportunities Tanzanian taxpayers had given me," she says.

Having studied electronic media in Belarus, Ntetema was optimistic when she applied for a job with the BBC Swahili Service, work which led eventually to becoming established as the BBC's Tanzania bureau chief.

The chain of events by which she found herself investigating witchcraft began with a chance encounter with a bald policeman. He told her of a bizarre but lethal witchcraft practice of using the brains of decapitated bald men to attract fish.

The buyers were in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; the witch doctors allegedly in Tanzania.

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When first rumours then credible reports of albinos being murdered for body parts began two years ago, Ntetema felt it was her duty as a journalist to investigate.



"Persons with albinism are just ordinary people"

"I first realized it was an organized trade in December 2007," she says. Ntetema's secretly filmed report – in which, posing as a customer, she was offered the chance to buy albino body parts by a witch doctor – aired in July 2008.

But Vicky Ntetema has paid a price for exposing the trade. The BBC itself has carried a story about her living in hiding after she received death threats.

She has also taken the cause of Tanzania's albino population to her heart, now spending some of her time working as a volunteer adviser to the NGO Under the Same Sun, which campaigns for the well-being of albinos worldwide.

She believes the best way to protect albino children in the Tanzanian bush is for boarding schools to accommodate them in integrated dormitories with non-albino children. "That way you make the children feel they are wanted in society, they're not isolated, there's no discrimination, no stigma, and other children understand that persons with albinism are just ordinary people."

# What must be done?

## A call to action by the International Federation

It is the acute misfortune of albino people in this part of Africa that, at a time of worldwide economic crisis, they have fallen prey to contract killers (working for witchdoctors whose clients must, at least, be wealthy) who profit from their murder.

That this violence should have focused on *children* who are both extremely vulnerable and extremely conspicuous has only served to deepen the shock in the countries involved, as well as further afield.

“Albinism is one of the most unfortunate vulnerabilities,” says International Federation Secretary General Bekele Geleta, “and it needs to be addressed immediately at international level.

“Our National Societies closest to this tragic saga have responded well, and they will continue focusing on the two or three areas where they can really add value – like eye care and public-health education for skin care and anti-discrimination, while we must now concentrate on how best to help them.”

The International Federation is formally and publicly committed to working with anyone exposed to violence, whatever its type, and discrimination but with a particular focus on children and young people. While everyone acknowledges the recent efforts by the authorities in Burundi and Tanzania to

### “It’s one of the most unfortunate vulnerabilities”

bring the killers of albinos to justice, more needs to be done to provide security in the communities where albinos now live in terror. Given that what Dr Luande calls the “emergency phase” continues (i.e. the killing goes on), the first priority of the International Federation is an urgent call for:

- Better protection for albinos by law-enforcement agencies.

The albinos’ plight, even before the occult killings began, touched many professional areas or mandates and exactly matched none of them. The albino tragedy and the effort to ameliorate it involve law enforcement, medicine (from optometry to oncology), public-health education, anti-discrimination, social work, livelihoods support, human rights, disability, parenting skills, and still others. As auxiliaries to their governments in the humanitarian field, National Societies and the International Federation, however, call for:

- A fully integrated response to the albino crisis, as unencumbered by professional demarcation and agency mandates as possible.



*Angelina Ghuma, of the Mwanza branch of the Tanzanian Albino Association, visits a village where there was a particularly notorious murder and dismemberment of a young albino girl. (IFRC)*

Given that many albinos – perhaps more than 10,000 by even the most conservative measure – are displaced or in hiding, the International Federation stresses the importance of:

- Urgently improving the living conditions in safe havens like Kabanga and Mitindo schools where albinos are protected by national authorities and assisted by the Red Cross.

Alongside the authorities’ work to enhance security, there must be a parallel effort – in which Red Cross volunteers can play a vital role – to provide equally life-saving health education on:

- Skin-cancer prevention and protection, including (if judged appropriate by local medical professionals) the provision of sunblock lotion.

The International Federation is now calling for action to support the work of National Societies most closely involved in the effort to assist Great Lakes albinos, the Red Cross societies of Burundi and Tanzania. The work of Red Cross volunteers already engaged in activities to reduce discrimination at community level must be further supported. The International Federation, finally, cannot and will not shrink from:

- Vocal advocacy for education to eliminate violence and discrimination against people with albinism.

There should be only one “exit strategy” for a humanitarian effort still embryonic at anything but the most local level: for Africa’s albinos to lead full, normal, happy lives.

## IFRC web stories



The Burundi Red Cross (BRC) was instrumental in coordinating the spontaneous humanitarian response to the occult-based killings of albinos, which began in the country's Ruyigi province near the border with Tanzania in August 2008. It included local NGOs, UN-agency staff, churches and schools. The BRC collected food, clothes and – as in the Kigoma region of Tanzania – cash that volunteers had donated from their own pockets. The BRC, which has deep roots in virtually every community in the small Great Lakes nation, is now seeking external support for a broader operation to help reintegrate albinos into mainstream society and reduce their acute vulnerability to hunters, skin cancer, and educational and social marginalization. There are believed to be at least 1,000 albinos in Burundi. The picture shows BRC volunteers in Butaganzwa, near Ruyigi town, taking a break from building a new branch headquarters with locally produced earth-bricks, thatch and timber. (Photo: Alex Wynter/IFRC)

### **Great Lakes: Red Cross moves to address humanitarian aftermath of albino killings, 6 November 2009**

By Alex Wynter in Dar es Salaam and Stella Marealla Masonu in Kasulu, Tanzania

<http://www.ifrc.org/docs/news/09/09110601/>

### **Albinos under Burundi police protection welcome Napoleon (age 1 week), 27 October 2009**

By Alexis Manirakiza in Ruyigi, Burundi

<http://www.ifrc.org/docs/news/09/09102801/>

### **Defending albinos' rights to life, 8 June 2009**

By Andrei Engstrand-Neacsu in Nairobi

<http://www.ifrc.org/docs/news/09/09060801/>

## The Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

### **Humanity**

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.

### **Impartiality**

It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

### **Neutrality**

In order to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

### **Independence**

The Movement is independent. The National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles of the Movement.

### **Voluntary service**

It is a voluntary relief movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.

### **Unity**

There can be only one Red Cross or Red Crescent Society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory.

### **Universality**

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in which all societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other, is worldwide.

# Through albino eyes

The plight of albino people in Africa's Great Lakes region  
and a Red Cross response

A publication from the International Federation of  
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The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies promotes the humanitarian activities of National Societies among vulnerable people.

By coordinating international disaster relief and encouraging development support it seeks to prevent and alleviate human suffering.

The International Federation, the National Societies and the International Committee of the Red Cross together constitute the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.



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It's time to make your move.  
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