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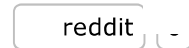
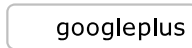
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03 Feb 2015

Malawi: refugees with albinism find succour in camp

Report

from [Jesuit Refugee Service](#)Published on 28 Jan 2015 — [View Original](#)

Dzaleka, 28 January 2015 – Many people in the Great Lakes and East Africa regions believe the body parts of people affected with albinism can be used as charms to bring luck and prosperity. Those affected with the lack of pigmentation are dehumanized and treated as valuable commodities, causing many to flee to Dzaleka camp. These albino refugees all share similar stories of flight, and while they find some sense of security in the camp, many challenges remain.

Shared stories of flight. Koko Haruma is 24 years old and from South Kivu in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). He was a university student studying English when rumours started that people were planning to abduct and kill him to sell his body parts. During a holiday at his parents' home, Koko was made aware of a plot for his abduction. His parents advised him to flee to Burundi, but there he faced continued insecurity, and the local police helped him to flee to Tanzania. In Tanzania, a mob plotted to kill him and he decided to seek asylum in Malawi. He arrived in Dzaleka refugee camp in 2011.

Asifiwe and Moise are siblings with albinism. Their parents fled the DRC to save their children's lives after persistent threats from various groups in South Kivu who believed butchering the albinos would bring them luck. Everyone was looking for a piece of their bodies: fishermen to increase their catch; soldiers to be formidable and invincible in battle;

businessmen to increase their profits. A brother of Asifiwe and Moise, also with albinism, was killed in 2012. After his murder the family decided to flee to Dzaleka camp.

Discrimination persists. Even after arriving the in camps, discrimination often persists. Now in her second year of primary school, Asifiwe rarely plays with her friends, because of the bigotry she faces. Teachers do what they can to discourage discrimination among the students, but sometimes to no avail.

In addition to the problems Asifiwe and Moise face in the camp, their parents also face ridicule for having so many albino children. Their parents have become fearful and seldom let their children out of their sight. This fear prevents them from working to support the family. Some people have encouraged them to sell their children to escape poverty and even offered to help find a market for them.

Providing support. Unfortunately, many agencies in the camp do not address issues specific to the albino population. In addition to discrimination, those born with albinism face health problems brought on by their lack of pigmentation. Procuring vital sunscreen lotion, sunglasses and reading glasses, and fighting allergic reactions which limit their nutritional options are some of the health-related challenges.

The Malawi country director for Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), Esther Kurz, took a personal interest in this largely neglected group. There was relief on the part of the albino refugees in Dzaleka when JRS, as an implementing partner for UNHCR, provided those affected with albinism with soap and sunscreen lotion which they greatly need, but cannot afford. Recently, JRS paid for eye examinations and provided reading glasses for Koko and Asifiwe.

"I am so grateful to JRS for all the support," commented Koko. "For a very long time we felt that there is no hope for albinos. Security did not mean much if we could not afford a decent life. The sunscreen lotion helps a lot and my sight has greatly improved with the eye glasses."

The call for support from other implementing partners in the camp was unanimous. Challenges and issues have been reported to the various organisations working with refugees but none have so far provided any solution or responded.

"Life is challenging enough being in a refugee camp, and being an albino doesn't help. Sometimes you feel there is systematic discrimination against albinos, even from the organisations that are supposed to help."

Percy Chikwela, Education Project Director, Dzaleka camp, Malawi

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