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Fear as albino boy vanishes

July 3 2011 at 11:29am
By Agiza Hlongwane

The last time Zulmira Nhatave saw her little brother, he was wearing his school uniform; white shirt, grey trousers and a black jersey.

Sibusiso Nhatave, a 14-year-old boy with albinism, was seen talking to a man outside his school, Ikhandlela Junior Secondary in eSikhwini, on the north coast of KwaZulu-Natal, where he was in Grade 8.

Yesterday marked 30 days since his disappearance and the police say they are still investigating, despite the lack of clues.

Now there are fears that he could be dead, possibly a victim of witchcraft. But Zulmira, herself an albino, refuses to throw in the towel.

"Time is passing, we are starting to lose hope... But if God is with us, we will find him."

Sibusiso's disappearance has sparked fear in Mkhobose village, which has a number of people with albinism.

"We used to fear being touched or taunted, now people are fearing for their lives. People are afraid, you never know what will happen," said Zulmira.

One in 4 000 South Africans is born with albinism, meaning that there are around 12 500 people living with the condition out of 50 million. It is described as an inherited genetic disorder. In addition to suffering from poor eyesight and skin susceptible to the sun, the lives of albinos are further complicated by age-old African myths, including risks of being killed for muti.

According to Canadian rights group Under the Same Sun, hundreds of albinos are killed for black magic in countries like Tanzania. Albino girls were raped because of a belief that they offered a cure for Aids. There, albino hunters kill them and harvest their blood, hair, genitals and other body parts for potions that witch-doctors say bring luck in love, life and business.

But some South Africans, like Durban gospel singer Babo Zuma and ex-Umkhanyakude district mayor Lawrence Mthombeni, have trumped prejudices.

"In the black community it is perceived that albinos don't die, they disappear, which is not true. Anyone who has this misconception can see me. My father was an albino and he died and I know his grave," said Mthombeni. Derogatory names – like isishawa – are still commonly used for albinos, as is the tendency to make people with albinism feel as if God has punished them.

Zulmira spoke of spending most of her life bearing the brunt of society's intolerance.

"People tease you and call you names. It is better in our area, because there are a number of people with albinism. But still, some believe that if they shake hands with a person with albinism, they will have luck. Some try to be too nice, others want to touch you to know how your skin feels. Others say we don't die but disappear, or if you give birth to an albino, you're paying the price for laughing at people with albinism when you were young. They think it's a curse. It's horrible."

Even finding true love can be tricky, said Zulmira, who has a year-old non-albino daughter.

"You have to be careful as a woman. People come to you all the time. You have to read them carefully. Some have beliefs that if you have sex with an albino, you will have luck..."



INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPERS
Nomasonto Mazibuko, president of the Albinism Society of Southern Africa, believes if people were more educated, Sibusiso Nhatave would not have disappeared. Photo: Sandile Ndlovu



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In the wake of Sibusiso's disappearance, even the feisty president of the Albinism Society of Southern Africa (Assa), Nomasono Mazibuko, has been forced to look over her shoulder amid fears of abduction – or possibly worse.

Although Mazibuko says the killings are not as rife locally and it is the first time – to her knowledge – that an albino has been abducted, she is concerned it might prompt copycat behaviour.

"I'm scared. I had to ask people to fetch me from where the taxi dropped me off," she said.

Mazibuko, a retired teacher, travelled from Joburg to Eshowe, near Sibusiso's home, to speak at an awareness campaign themed "A child with albinism is still a child."

"If people were better informed, if they knew that Sibusiso was just like any other child, he would not have disappeared," she said.

Assa has been petitioning the government for support, although their efforts have largely been thwarted by government bureaucracy.

"In 2008, from the killings in Tanzania, albinism was declared a disability, which means we now qualify as disabled people due to our weaker skin and eyesight. We are trying to get assistance from the government. We are asking for access to sunscreen, access to disability grants to raise our children. Teachers, nurses and our government leaders don't know enough about albinism. We need education campaigns.

"I've tried to get a meeting with the minister of Women, Children and People with Disabilities, but it has not happened because of bureaucracy.

"Hospitals have a role to play. With HIV, mothers are told at every antenatal clinic about the possibility of giving birth to a child with HIV. But the same is not happening with people with albinism."

Sazi Mhlongo, president of the Traditional Healers Association of South Africa, believes the government needs to come down hard on witchcraft.

"People who kill others for muti are witches, and we need legislation that will deal specifically with the suppression of witchcraft," said Mhlongo. - Tribune

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Damon Leff, wrote

11:00am on 4 July 2011

South African Witches are offended by Mhlongo's call to "tackle witchcraft with tough new measures." South African court records prove that those found guilty of muti murders and of trading in human body parts, have never self-identified as Witches, but have been identified by the courts as rogue traditional healers (isangomas and inyangas who are sometimes identified as witchdoctors). NO self-identified practitioner of Witchcraft in S.A. has ever been found guilty of muti murder! The 1957 Witchcraft Suppression Act already makes it illegal for anyone to accuse another of witchcraft in South Africa. Mhlongo should be arrested for contravening this Act. Leave South African Witches alone! We are innocent of the crimes we are being accused of ! Director: South African Pagan Rights Alliance <http://www.paganrightsalliance.orgpress.html>

Mark, wrote

05:03am on 4 July 2011

There are 33,300,000 of HIV positive single people worldwide. If you are one of them and you are prepared to become a little brave then You may find that POZmingle. com is just for you. For you will come across new individuals who will certainly become life long friends or Love of life and achieve a degree of self-belief you never would have believed possible.

gef.o., wrote

01:18pm on 3 July 2011

Fear as albino boy vanishes. I sincerely hope that Sibusiso will be back! You cannot tempt by saying "if God is with us we will...". And God did not punish those who are albinos. What a backwards world!

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