

HOME

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Feature

Albino victim evicted from safe-house

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ONE year
ago,
Mariam
Staford
Bandaba,
an albino
woman
living in
Tanzania,
was
viciously
attacked by
a machete-
wielding
gang who tried to kill her and sell her remains for witchcraft. She escaped with her life, but only just.



Ms Miriam Stafford Bandaba

The attackers chopped off one of her hands - the other had to be amputated in hospital, where she spent weeks recovering from her horrific injuries. Traumatized, Ms Stafford Bandaba then took the brave step of identifying her attackers.

She was taken to a safe-house where she lived under government protection. But the government recently decided she could no longer live there, leaving the 28-year-old fearing for her safety.

The administrative officer in the village where she was re-housed, Erasmus Rugarabamu, told the BBC Swahili service that the situation had improved and no albinos had been killed in her home village in the north-western Kagera region in the past year.

The decision by the authorities comes just a few weeks after a court sentenced three men to death for the murder of an albino boy. Ms Stafford Bandaba is one of thousands of people with albinism who live in fear in Tanzania.

Her harrowing tale has become commonplace in a country where 53 albinos are believed to have been murdered in the past two years.

Albinos, who are pale because of a lack of pigment in their skin, have been routinely killed because witchdoctors say that potions made with their body parts will bring good fortune in love, life and business to those who use them.

The killings have also spread to neighbouring Burundi where at least 12 people have been murdered. The victims were mutilated and their body parts are believed to have been sold in Tanzania to make potions.

One man was sentenced to death and eight others were jailed in Burundi earlier this year. Ms Staford Bandaba's alleged attackers have been caught in north-western Tanzania, the region where the vast majority of the murders have been carried out.

The story of her eviction caught the attention of a businessman who has agreed to let her and her mother live in a room in his house for a year. But after that she has no idea what will happen to her.

Before moving out of the safe house, she told me that she broke down in tears when the district commissioner told her the news. "I can't imagine what will happen. What I did in front of him was just start crying." I was born an albino, but my attackers have made me disabled.

She is even more upset because it is not just her who had to leave. Her father and four siblings who were taking care of her and feeding her were also evicted. They have had no choice but to return to the village where she was so brutally attacked.

Her father, Staford Bandaba, admitted he was very anxious about reprisal attacks being carried out on his family.

"Those who are responsible, all their relatives are still living there in the village, and those released from prison, are still living where we were living. So how can we stay there?" But Mr Rugarabamu defended the government's decision.

"Some of the attackers were found not guilty, so we can't keep them in prison, so they will be allowed to return to the village according to the law. But those found guilty are still in prison awaiting their fate."

That is little comfort for Ms Staford Bandaba's father. Now that she no longer has government protection, "We are worried that they will finish her off." And he is not the only one who thinks that could happen.

"Albinos are still being hunted and we don't yet know how to solve the problem," one local resident says. "We cannot understand this decision."

"The government only seems to be doing half its duty. They started well and they should continue to help Mariam get a permanent house which will be safe," another person tells me.

President Jakaya Kikwete has said the albino murders have brought shame to Tanzania and his government has taken steps to identify and prosecute the perpetrators.

In March thousands of people took part in an exercise to identify those they suspected of being involved, by filling in forms anonymously. The authorities have also issued a ban on all traditional healers, and several people have been arrested.

The government has now given Ms Staford Bandaba a plot of land to build a house away from her village. But she says she has no money for the construction work, leaving her feeling abandoned at a time when she needs the help most.

"I was born an albino," she says. "But my attackers have made me disabled. I am begging all Tanzanians to kindly keep on helping me, because my situation is now worse. I have no hands."

Fortunately, a local businessman has heard her plea. But in a year's time, Ms Staford Bandaba will once again be faced with the prospect of having to return to the village where she was nearly killed.

Meanwhile, The Tanzania Albino Society (TSA) has called for the men found guilty of killing an albino boy to be hanged publicly as a warning to others. A court sentenced them to death for attacking the boy and severing his legs for use in witchdoctors' potions.

The BBC's John Ngyahyoma in Dar es Salaam says there are more than 100 people on death row, but no-one has been executed in more than 15 years. But TAS chairman Ernest Kimaya urged the president to endorse the sentence.

"I want other perpetrators to learn - seeing is believing," he told the BBC. Mr Kimaya told Tanzania's Citizen newspaper that a public execution would also "show that the government is serious in its war on albino killers".

Albino people, who lack pigment in their skin and appear pale, are killed because potions

made from their body parts are believed to bring good luck and wealth. The Tanzanian government has publicly stated its desire to end the killings.

In March, President Jakaya Kikwete called on Tanzanians to come forward with any information they might have. Officials banned witchdoctors from practising, however many have continued to work.

Many of Tanzania's estimated 17,000 albino people are now living in fear, especially in villages in the north-west where the majority of the murders have occurred. The case in Kahama recently was the first conviction in Tanzania for an albino killing.

Correspondents say there is also a fear of reprisal killings as witchdoctors and their clients wield a lot of power in their communities.

Witchdoctors in Tanzania and other parts of East Africa have made tens of thousands of dollars from selling potions and other items made from the bones, hair, skin and genitals of dead albino people.

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