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Welcome to Albino Island

By DAVID LOWE

Published: 09 Dec 2008

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WITH their milky white skin, wispy hair and haunting, pale eyes, they are called "the living ghosts" by locals.

And the vulnerable albinos of Tanzania in East Africa have more than insults to fear.

They are being hunted down and hacked to death to satisfy a growing demand for their body parts and blood to use in black magic.

It is the stuff of nightmares.

In the Mwangi district, near Mount Kilimanjaro, a baby girl was dressed in black by her mother and left alone in the family hut.

A group of men cut off the pale girl's legs, slit her throat, poured the blood into a pot and drank it.

In another sickening case a man was caught trying to enter the Democratic Republic of Congo with an albino child's **HEAD** in his luggage.

He said a businessman in the country had offered to pay generously for the trophy, depending on the weight of the head.

The stories go on. A 35-year-old fisherman at Lake Tanganyika allegedly attempted to sell his 24-year-old albino wife to two businessmen from Congo for around £2,000.

And just last week, in the province of Shinyanga, 13-year-old albino Elizabeth Hussein was tempted from her home after hearing that a film about Jesus was to be screened in the village.

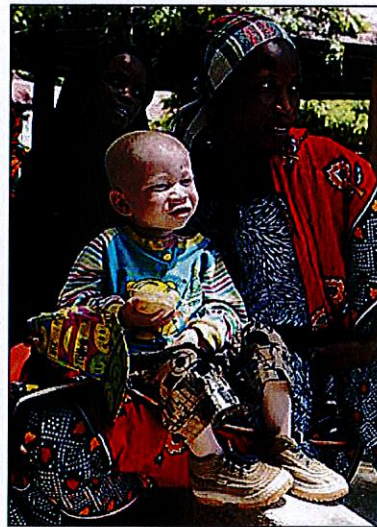
On the way back she was hacked apart by a machete-armed mob. Her limbs were found at the home of a witch doctor - who fled cops following a tip-off.

Two days later 47-year-old Ezekiel John, 47, was shot and had his arms and legs severed near the city of Kigoma.

These latest killings bring the number of brutal deaths of albinos in Tanzania to 35 in just a year.

The minority community also suffers massive prejudice. Not only do they struggle to get jobs but the kids also need bodyguards to get to school safely.

Even corpses are not safe. Heavy rocks have to be placed on top of the graves of albinos to stop bodysnatchers.



Africa ... albino child

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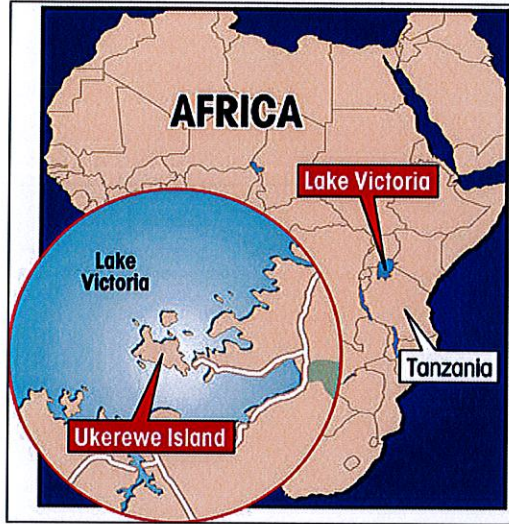
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Slaughter



Safety ... map of Ukerewe Island in Lake Victoria, Tanzania

Little wonder that so many Tanzanian albinos are flocking to a refuge on the remote island of Ukerewe on Lake Victoria, where such shocking behaviour is mercifully rare.

Alphonse Kajanja, an albino fishmonger, runs a stall in Ukerewe's main market.

He says: "Life is better on the island. People here don't believe in this satanic campaign."

Albinism is an inherited disorder. Sufferers lack melanin pigment, which protects the skin, eyes and hair from the sun's ultraviolet rays.

Because they are so prone to skin cancer in scorching Tanzania, sufferers have an average life expectancy of just 30.

Across the world, around one person in 20,000 suffers from albinism. But it is much more widespread in Africa, with a rate of around one in 5,000.

Ukerewe is thought to have the world's highest concentration.

Legend has it that a mineral in native fish causes the high level of albinism.

But some locals believe dumped albino children traditionally found sympathy and foster homes among Ukerewe's big-hearted population.

The recent albino slaughter spree is being blamed on witch doctors, who claim that limbs and blood from pale-skinned sufferers enhance spells.

Fishermen believe if they weave the red hair from an albino into nets, fish will be attracted by the glimmer.

Miners for gold, rubies and mineral tanzanite pay large sums for charms made with a potion mixed from albino body parts.

Others are said to bury the bones of albinos as they dig.

The Tanzanian Albino Society was established to fight the spread of such beliefs in the vast country, which has a population of 40million.



Fear ... Zihada Msembo, secretary general of the Tanzanian Albino Society

"We are terrified to go outside or to get into our beds at night."

Hack

Al-Shaymaa Kwegyir, Tanzania's first albino MP, is determined to halt the murderous campaign

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The charity is funded by the British organisation Action On Disability & Development.

Zihada Msembo, the secretary general of the society, says: "They are cutting us up like chickens. Our biggest fear right now is the fear of living.

?If you leave work at night as an albino you are unsure of reaching home safely. When you sleep you are unsure of waking up in one piece.

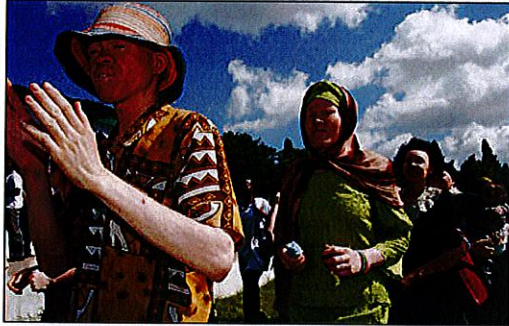
"In the streets you hear people plotting. They say, 'Look at the zeru (the Swahili word for ghost) - we can get him'.

against her people.

She is delighted 170 arrests have been made in relation to the killings so far.

But no one has been successfully prosecuted and she wants tougher action from President Jakaya Kikwete and the government.

Al-Shaymaa, 48, says: "In October we staged a demonstration in the city of Dar es Salaam to raise awareness of our situation. Many people were brave and supported it.



Fighting back ... albino protest in Dar es Salaam

"But that same evening one of the demonstrators was followed home. She was grabbed and the assailants cut off her arm.

?They tried to hack off the other and it was left hanging and later had to be amputated. The attackers ran away.

"Now she is living in terror because she won't be able to fight back if they come after her again."

Ernest Kimaya, 42, chairman of the society, says: "The people who are killing us are witch doctors or agents for them.

?What is happening is mad and horrible - but we need to stand up to it.

"We need money to pay a lawyer. The government has ordered the police to carry out a census of albinos so we know how many of us there are.

?They have been told to protect us and escort children to school.

"It is a big step forward - but we urgently need prosecutions to begin so that more Tanzanians hear of this injustice."

- To make a donation to Action On Disability & Development, go to add.org.uk.

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