

Tanzania: Living in fear: daylight provides no protection for albinos

By Anne Wanjiru in Dar es Salaam

Making ends meet for many of Tanzania's albinos can be difficult. As I have discovered, albinos not only face occult-based murders and attacks, they also have to suffer life under the harsh glare of the African sun usually with little or no protection. By night, albinos live in fear of attack. By day, they live in fear of the sun.

At 23, Pendo Vumilia should be in the prime of her life with plans for the future. The reality is somewhat different.

She sits on a hospital bed at the Ocean Road Cancer Institute in Tanzania's economical capital, Dar es Salaam, looking forlornly out of the window. Her right ear is covered with a huge bandage and she complains of an unbearable pain.

"A few months ago I discovered a swelling in my right ear. It started to ache terribly and I had to have it looked at. The doctor told me I had a tumour that is cancerous and spreading," she says.

It is not uncommon to meet several albinos in the hospital, all seeking chemotherapy. On this visit, I met seven of them – all of them under 40.

Albinos are more vulnerable to skin cancer because they are born without melanin or pigment in their skin. This means that their skin has virtually no way of protecting itself against the sun's harmful rays. Albinos burn very easily in the sun and, without proper protection, they can all too easily develop skin cancer.

"I am a farmer from Muhimbili and I have spent hours in the sun tilling the land so that I could make a living," says Pendo.

Accompanying me to the hospital is Hamis Ngomera, a volunteer with the Tanzania Red Cross National Society and a member of the Albino Association of Tanzania. He tells that health education and the provision of protective clothing can significantly reduce the risk of developing skin cancer. According to Hamis many albinos do not know how important it is to take extra care when going out in the sun. They don't realize the consequences of not doing so until it's too late.

The Red Cross hopes to be able to provide health education through the printing of brochures and use of its well established peer educator network. Provision of wide-brimmed hats and long-sleeved tops is also part of the Red Cross plans.

Sun screen is expensive for many albinos, particularly those living in the countryside. They travel hundreds of kilometres to seek treatment at the Ocean Road Cancer Institute because it is a free government hospital.

With no increase in its funding, the hospital's capacity is at full stretch. In the women's ward, for instance, two patients share a bed, while some sleep on mattresses on the floor. Pendo says she arrived three weeks ago, but she has not yet received any treatment.

The hospital's head nurse, Mary Haule, explains: "Apart from a lack of space, we do not have a regular supply of medication. Many times, we have asked patients to go out and buy their own drugs from an outside chemist because our stocks are so low."

An albino cancer patient on the women's ward, Junior Nahashon, has such a prescription. The pain and anti-sickness drugs alone cost 15,000 Tanzania shillings – approximately 11 US dollars – and this is a purchase she says she simply cannot afford.

Hamis believes that access to education is one major solution. "People with albinism need to access education so that they no longer have to engage in casual labour, but can get white collar jobs that will keep them constantly protected from the sun. I am 40 and as a teacher, I was not out in the sun much. I am lucky."

Whilst at the hospital, the lyrics to one particular song are going over in my mind.

"Je suis un noir, ma peau est blanche. Je suis un blanc, mon sang est noir. Et moi j'aime bien ça, c'est la différence qui est jolie."

The lyrics are from a song by Salif Keita, a Malian albino musician. Born in the city of Djoliba, Keita is fully aware of the harsh discrimination that albinos face in traditional African societies. Cast out by his family and ostracized by his community because of his albinism – considered a sign of bad luck in the Mandinka culture – Keita decided to fight for the rights of people with disabilities.

He joined the Red Cross Red Crescent's call to end the suffering of the Great Lakes albinos and he prefaced the IFRC's advocacy report, Through Albino Eyes. His latest album, La Différence, is dedicated to the struggle of the albino community worldwide.

And when the album won the Best World Music award at the French Victoires de la Musique 2010, the plight of albinos around the world was highlighted at an international level.

Help the albinos

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