

TANZANIA

Hunted for body parts, Tanzania's albinos get help from B.C. man

GEOFFREY YORK

Ruvu Mnazi, Tanzania — The Globe and Mail
Published Monday, Apr. 26, 2010 4:00AM EDT
Last updated Monday, Nov. 15, 2010 7:22AM EST

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Her face still scarred by the machete attack that nearly killed her, Rukia Khalfani cannot hide her astonishment when she gazes into the eyes of the Canadian who has come to comfort her. His eyes are as pale as hers, and his skin is as white.

She had no idea that albinos existed outside Tanzania. She laughs in amazement.

"I want you to know that I am your brother," the visitor from Canada, Peter Ash, said. "You and your children are just absolutely beautiful."

It's a message she has never heard before. Shunned by her village, she raised her children in isolation in a mud-and-stick hut on the edge of the jungle, where her teenage daughter could escape the taunts and threats of her classmates.

When people passed by their home, she heard them shouting "dili dili" - the Swahili word for "deal" - a reference to the lucrative profits they could make by selling her body parts to witch doctors. It's a word that Tanzania's albinos hear every day.

On the night of Feb. 7, a machete-wielding man crept up to her hut in darkness. When she stepped outside, carrying her infant daughter on her back, the man slashed viciously at the baby, trying to sever her leg. He pursued them into the hut, slashing Ms. Khalfani on the forehead, leaving her with blood pouring over her face.

It was the 60th reported attack on Tanzanian albinos since 2007. It was followed by two more attacks this month, including the killing last Sunday of a four-year-old girl whose right arm and leg were chopped off. At least 56 albinos have been killed in the attacks, and many more are believed to have died in unreported cases.

The grisly trade in albino body parts is supported by powerful forces - even politicians and police officers, according to experts - and prosecutions have

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been slow. At least five policemen were among the dozens arrested after the attacks, but only two of the 56 homicides have led to criminal convictions. The affluent buyers who pay for the body parts have never been identified in court or police records.

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Mr. Ash, a 44-year-old B.C. businessman who himself has albinism, is trying to change all of this. He has spent \$1-million in a campaign against the albino killings, setting up an organization in Tanzania to lobby for justice and educate the public. He plans to spend a further \$500,000 to \$1-million annually to keep the fight alive.

Albinism, a genetic condition that causes a lack of pigmentation in the hair, skin and eyes, is more common in Africa than in North America. Most of the estimated 100,000 albinos in Tanzania are persecuted and fearful, and poorly educated because of vision problems. Mr. Ash visits the attack survivors to dispel the myths and provide support and scholarships.

This week, on his fifth trip to Tanzania since 2008, Mr. Ash drove down the narrow, bumpy roads to Ms. Khalfani's village to offer assistance. When he met Ms. Khalfani, he took off his glasses and showed her his nearly blind eyes and his easily burned white skin.

Her 14-month-old daughter has a vivid purple scar running from her thigh to her hip, where the attacker tried to chop off her leg. The assailant escaped, but Ms. Khalfani's husband and another man were detained for 10 days of questioning.

Her husband denies any involvement, but she has separated from him and moved into her mother's home for protection. "I don't trust people very much nowadays," she told Mr. Ash. "I just stay at home with my mother. I don't even go out for firewood."

Albinos are often betrayed by husbands or other relatives, lured by payments of up to \$3,000 for an albino limb and \$75,000 for a "full set" of albino body parts. The parts are ground into potions and talismans that are believed to bring wealth and power.

A recent survey found that 93 per cent of Tanzanians believe in witchcraft - the highest percentage in Africa. Witch doctors were banned by the government last year, yet many still operate freely.

Albinos have been murdered in other African countries too, including at least a dozen in Burundi. The difference, however, is that the Burundi killers were prosecuted and convicted, which rarely happens in Tanzania, despite pledges of action from its Prime Minister.

After visiting Ms. Khalfani's village, Mr. Ash flew to the shores of Lake Victoria and drove to the town of Igoma, where 22-year-old albino Jesca Charles was killed last June. She disappeared after attending an evening church meeting. Her mother still cannot bring herself to talk about it. "When we found the body, the limbs had all been chopped off - the arms at the shoulders and the legs at the knees," her father, Charles Joshua, said.

Jesca was buried in a cement-covered grave, so that her remains cannot be dug up for sale to witch doctors.

An even more horrific story came from another village in the region in 2008. The killers slit the neck of five-year-old albino Mariam Emmanuel, drained her blood into a cooking pot, drank the blood, chopped off her limbs and fled. Her eight-year-old brother, Manyasi, heard the killing from another room and barely spoke for months afterward.

He was transferred to a school for the blind, where 105 albino children are now guarded in an overcrowded fenced-off compound, described by Mr. Ash as "a concentration camp." His non-profit organization, Under the Same Sun, has since paid for Manyasi to attend a private boarding school.

Nemes Temba, a 33-year-old Tanzanian albino who works for Mr. Ash's organization, remembers when the killings began in 2007. He started to hear the new taunt - " *dili dili*" - on the streets of the cities. "Almost everyone with albinism was scared," he said. "When it was dark, we would stay at home."

He sees the attacks as a sign of Tanzania's spiritual confusion. "People aren't sure what they believe in. They only believe in material things. They want to be rich or politically famous, and they're not afraid of the police. They'll do anything to be rich or famous."

Mr. Ash made his first trip to Africa in 2008, after seeing reports of the albino killings. "I felt their helplessness, their fear," he said. "It would strike fear into me if I was living here, knowing that people could break into my house and kill me. Albinos have been dehumanized in this country, like Hitler dehumanized the Jews."

As a boy growing up in Montreal, he was teased and called "snowflake" or "Casper the ghost." But he never experienced anything like the persecution in Tanzania. He has had to hire a security detail to guard him and his brother, Paul, when they travel here. One of his senior officials, Vicky Ntetema, was forced into hiding in 2008 because of death threats after she produced an investigative report on the albino killings.

Mr. Ash, who spent 10 years as a Baptist minister in Manitoba before going into the consumer finance business, is planning a television advertising campaign in Tanzania to dispel the myths and lies about albinos. He has been masterful in mobilizing the Tanzanian media to his cause. He brings television crews on most of his visits to albino families, and he speaks publicly at every opportunity - even at Sunday church services.

"Albinos are not evil," he told a crowd of thousands at a church service in Dar es Salaam last week. "They are not a curse. They are not from the devil. They are God's children."

His message was undermined, however, by the pastor's Swahili translation. The pastor used the word *zeru zeru* - a derogatory term for albinos - throughout the sermon. He was simply unaware of any other word.

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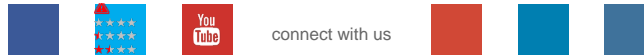
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