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Living in fear: Tanzania's albinos

Twenty-five people with albinism have been murdered in Tanzania since March, a BBC investigation has found.

Albinos are targeted for body parts that are used in witchcraft, and killings continue despite government efforts to stamp out the grisly practice, the BBC's Karen Allen says.

Once, albinos used to seek shelter from the sun. Now they have gone into hiding simply to survive, after a series of killings linked to witchcraft.

In Tanzania, 25 albinos have been killed in the past year.

The latest victim was a seven-month-old baby. He was mutilated on the orders of a witchdoctor peddling the belief that potions made from an albino's legs, hair, hands, and blood can make a person rich.

Sorcery and the occult maintain a strong foothold in this part of the world, especially in the remote rural areas around the fishing and mining regions of Mwanza, on the shores of Lake Victoria.

Nobody seems to know why the killings are happening now, but Tanzanian President Jakaya Kikwete is now putting pressure on the police to identify where albinos live and offer them protection.

This is not an easy task when BBC investigations suggest that some police are being "bought off" in order to look away when such appalling crimes are committed.

'We want your legs'

The last adult albino to be murdered - just a few weeks ago - was Nyerere Rutahiro.

He was eating dinner outside in his modest rural compound, when a gang of four strangers burst in, and threatened to arrest him. As his wife Susannah looked on helplessly, the men began to hack at Nyerere's arms and legs with machetes.

"We want your legs," they shouted, "We want your legs," his wife recalls, still deeply traumatised by what she saw.

Nyerere was clearly being targeted for being albino - but in every other respect he was an accepted part of his community. A father of two in his 50s, farming cassava - just like everybody else.

His body was laid to rest in a cement-sealed grave to protect against grave robbers who often steal body parts of the dead to give to



Winifrida Rutahiro (2nd left) says she is now scared even to leave her house



Nyerere Rutahiro's body was laid to rest in a cement-sealed grave

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witchdoctors. A builder had been hired to do the job.

Looking on as the funeral came to a close, is Nyerere's sister Winifrida. She too is albino.

Terrified, she pulls her six year-old-son closer to her. Though he is black (the gene that causes albinism is a recessive gene), he too is vulnerable.

It is all too clear what is going through Winifrida's mind. Will they come for her next?

Squinting her pale eyes against the midday sun, Winifrida whispers in a barely audible voice: "Please, ask the government to take me away from here, I dare not come out of the house since my brother was killed."

BBC investigation

This is the work of organised gangs, according to Tanzanian police in the commercial capital Dar es Salaam.

Witchdoctors, middlemen and the clients who pay for albino body parts are among the 173 people in custody so far for these macabre killings. None has been prosecuted.

The BBC sought to investigate how sorcerers' tales of albinos are being channelled into gruesome crimes.

An intermediary posing as a "client" with mining and fishing interests seeking to get rich quick, visited a prominent witchdoctor on our behalf at dusk. They were told that albino body parts could be obtained without difficulty, for a price.

The police are now investigating these claims. Since then, a seven-month-old albino baby was killed nearby.

Ostracised

The sad reality is that albinos who can afford it, are now flocking to urban centres where they feel a little more safe.

And nowhere is it considered more safe than at the Ocean Cancer Institute in Dar es Salaam - where so many of them come to get treatment for the skin and eye conditions that albinos often fall prey to.

Away from the wards, under the shade of a mango tree, a black woman sits with her albino daughter. Ashura and Amina, her angelic looking nine-year-old.

They may seem an odd couple at first, but the firm eyes of the mother reveals a woman deeply protective of her child. She is a woman who looks older than her years.

Ashura and Amina now live on their own, ostracised by the rest of their family.

"When Amina was born my husband and the older two children moved away," recounts Ashura.

"They were so ashamed and thought Amina would bring us bad luck... but I am not leaving her... she's my daughter."

Every parent nurturing an albino child has good reason to be frightened in today's Tanzania. The stories of youngsters being snatched from their parents' arms or attacked on the way to school

“ When Amina was born my husband and the older two children moved away. They were so ashamed and thought Amina would bring us bad luck... but I am not leaving her ”

Ashura, mother of nine-year-old albino Amina

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are - quite frankly - horrific.

Albino MP

Albinism affects one in 20,000 people worldwide, but in Tanzania the prevalence appears to be much higher.

The Albino Association of Tanzania says that although just 4,000 albinos are officially registered in the country, they believe the actual number could be as high as 173,000. A census is now under way to try to verify the figures.



Al-Shymaa Kway-Geer (right) is a former airline clerk

Demonised by the ignorant, prized by the superstitious, albinos are now getting organised in urban centres - putting their trust in Tanzania's first albino MP.

Al-Shymaa Kway-Geer is an impressive woman, who was nominated by the Tanzanian president to give the albino community a voice.

Not only is she trying to lobby for subsidies to assist her community for the medical treatment they invariably need as a result of their albinism, but she aims to lead by example.

"When I used to go out, people called me zeru zeru (the derogatory term for albino). They used to chase me, follow me, but now I am someone, they call me honourable, the term we use for politicians," Mrs Kway-Geer says.

Understandably, she is distressed and baffled by the recent spate of albino killings which do not appear to be replicated among Tanzania's neighbours.

But she hopes that by standing up and being counted as possibly the world's first albino lawmaker, the rest of Tanzanian society will start to care.

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