

Albino Africans live in fear after witch-doctor butchery

A series of horrific murders of albinos in Tanzania has shocked the nation. As children are hacked to death for their body parts, believed to bring good luck, the authorities are failing to stop a trade in organs that relies on superstition and greed

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The Tanzanian MP recounts the appalling story in a tone of sadness and horror. A woman named Salma had been told by her family to dress her baby entirely in black and to lay the little girl in a hut, alone. 'The mother didn't understand, but she obeyed the elders,' said Al-Shaymaa Kwegyir.

'Some hours later, unknown men arrived and went straight to the hut. They used a machete to cut off the child's legs. Then they slit her throat and poured the blood into a pot and drank it.'

Amid a spate of at least 29 murders of albinos in Tanzania, Kwegyir, herself an albino, has become one of the country's most prominent political campaigners on the issue. She cited evidence that killers acting for witch doctors are turning to cannibalism alongside their quest for lucrative body parts as magic charms.

Buyers from as far away as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Kenya and Uganda believe the legs, genitals, eyes and hair of people with albinism can help them achieve instant wealth. The youngest victim so far was seven months old.

Kwegyir, 48, had met Salma in her village in the Mwanga district near Kilimanjaro. 'It is the first cannibalistic case, but in other respects it is a classic example. Someone in the extended family who has links with a witch doctor will help set up the abduction or killing. These murders are inspired by ignorance and greed. An albino hand is selling for two million shillings (£1,200),' she said.

Despite government moves to protect albinos - who have an inherited gene disorder which results in a lack of pigmentation and can produce near-blindness - the targeted murders, which were first reported a year ago, are continuing. 'Two weeks pass and we think it's getting better, then another one happens,' said Kwegyir, who was appointed to parliament in April by President Jakaya Kikwete in order to combat prejudice.

The murders are the result of seemingly conflicting beliefs spread by witch doctors, who are still consulted by many of Tanzania's 40 million-strong population, that albinos are either cursed or have supernatural properties. Some fishermen believe that, if they weave the red hair from an albino into their nets, fish will be attracted by the golden

glimmer. Miners for gold, rubies and tanzanite are reported to pay large sums for juju (magic) amulets, which they wear around their necks or strapped to their arms and which are made up with a potion mixed from albino body parts. Others are said to bury the bones of albinos in the ground they are digging.

A relative haven of safety for Tanzania's albinos is the small park outside the single-storey wards of Dar es Salaam's Cancer Institute. In alleys leading between the wards, albinos with bandages on their heads and feet, or slings on their arms, wait for check-ups.

They have russet-coloured hair and milky-white skin, but their facial features are African. Many are covered in welts, scabs and burns. Cancer is their greatest killer and, whereas albinos in developed countries can hope to live until normal old age, Africans who have the condition rarely survive beyond the age of 40.

Zihada Msembo said her greatest enemy used to be the sun. Now she walks in fear wherever she goes. 'In the streets you hear people plotting. They say "look at the zero [ghost]. We can get him". We are terrified to go outside or to get into our beds at night.'

The hospital's rundown gatehouse is the home of the Tanzanian Albino Society. Its chairman, Ernest Kimaya, 42, said the organisation ran on an annual government grant which he summarised as 'equal to a week's tea budget at State House'. Albinos need skin creams, spectacles and large-print books, but they receive no funding for these. Kimaya wears glasses but at his computer his nose is less than 10cm from the screen.

He said Tanzanian albinos had always faced discrimination in schools or in the workplace. 'People believe a woman who has an albino child has been cursed and that the whole family will now suffer bad luck. In olden days midwives killed the babies at birth but now that there are health centres, albino babies do survive.'

Kimaya's society, probably Africa's oldest albino association, set up in 1980, feels powerless in the face of the attacks. 'The people who are killing us are witch doctors or agents for them. What is happening is mad and horrible,' Kimaya said.

Kimaya said the superstition of money-making had always existed but used to be confined to remote areas. Tanzania's recent minerals boom, which has attracted thousands of people to try their luck in small-scale mining, may have contributed to the spread of the belief. Murders are now also reported in neighbouring countries and Kikwete has asked other heads of state in the Southern African Development Community to act to stamp out the killings.

Last week the Daily News reported the arrest of a 35-year-old fisherman at Lake Tanganyika who had allegedly attempted to sell his 24-year-old albino wife to two businessmen from the Democratic Republic of Congo for 3.6m shillings (about £2,000). Another report told of a man caught at the border carrying a bag containing a baby's head. He told police that a Tanzanian witch doctor had offered to pay him according to the weight of the head.

More than 170 people, most of them witch doctors, have been arrested in Tanzania this year; 53 are in custody, but Kimaya wants firmer, swifter action. 'We need money to pay a lawyer. The government has ordered the police to carry out a census of albinos, so that we know how many of us there are,' he said.

'They have also been instructed to work with villagers to protect us and to escort albino children to school. It is a big step forward, but we urgently need prosecutions to begin so that Tanzanians hear of this injustice,' added Kimaya, who is one of three albino siblings out of seven children in his family. He is married to a black woman and their four children are black.

Even though albinism exists in Europe and North America, where it affects one in 20,000 people, it is far more widespread in Africa. One of the continent's music stars, Salif Keita from Mali, is an albino. One study has put the Tanzanian ratio at one in 4,000 people. Kimaya believes there are 370,000 albinos in Tanzania. Some researchers have suggested that the source of the albino gene can be traced to the east coast of Africa.

Despite government efforts and growing pressure from abroad, including a motion condemning the events in Tanzania in September in the European Parliament, the country's albinos are still living in fear.

Kwegyir was an activist for the ruling party and an information officer at Dar es Salaam airport before becoming an MP. She said there was an urgent need for the international community to support albinos: 'If we can have skin creams, books and spectacles, this will help us to lead more normal lives and to come out of the shadows and combat prejudice.'

For the moment the safety of albinos is her prime concern. 'On 19 October we staged a demonstration in Dar es Salaam to raise awareness of our situation. Many people were brave and came out. But that same evening one of the demonstrators was followed home, grabbed, and the assailants tried to hack off one of her arms. This was left hanging and later had to be amputated. The attackers cut off the other arm and ran away.

'Now she is living in constant terror because she won't be able to fight back if they come after her a second time.'

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