

TESTIMONY
OF
OBED BYAMUGISHA
BEFORE
THE
UNITED STATES CONGRESS
HOUSE FOREIGN AFFAIRS
COMMITTEE
SUB-COMMITTEE
ON
GLOBAL HEALTH, GLOBAL HUMAN
RIGHTS AND INTERNATIONAL
ORGANISATIONS

Sept 19th, 2023

10:00am

Discretion is advised, the presentation has sensitive and graphic information and images on the life of survivors and victims

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Wild, distinguished members of the committee, my name is Obed Byamugisha and my hearing title is, “*Efforts to End Ritual Abuses and Sacrifices in Africa*”. I thank you for the opportunity to testify before you and your committee on this subject.

I am here as a first-hand witness and as a person who has been fighting these practices for 12 years in Uganda. I am formerly the National Child Protection Program Manager for World Vision Uganda, I have Managed and Coordinated a number of grants including UNICEF Emergency response project in the Northern Uganda Refugee Response particularly Bidibidi, Adjuman and Yumbe Refugee resettlement, I have Given child protection technical lectures and keynotes speaking in international conferences in the USA, Thailand, and Ethiopia. During this work I have directly rescued 28 children who otherwise would have died due to body mutilations. Four children died in my hands on the way to hospitals and I have confronted this organized crime at the grassroot with communities in Uganda.

Ritualistic murders and human sacrifice affect both children and adults but children are the most targeted and affected group in Africa. Children by virtue of their age are one of the most vulnerable groups globally. They are susceptible to all forms of violence ranging from sexual abuse, maltreatment, trafficking, and their bodies mutilated. Considering the disregard for human rights, child sacrifice has become one of the cardinal challenges that children face.

*Child sacrifice has been defined as the harmful practice of removing a child’s body parts, blood or tissue of the child while still alive.*¹The act of sacrifice usually involves mutilation of body parts which may include genitals, limbs, eyes, and the heart. These body parts are either worn, buried, or consumed by an individual in the belief that they will assist in several issues:

¹ Similar to the definition of Human Sacrifice under the Prevention in Trafficking of Persons Act 2009.

overcoming illness, gaining wealth, obtaining blessings from ancestors, protection, and initiation, assisting with conception, and dictating the gender of the child.

This practice is perceived as a criminal activity because, a crime is a wrong which affects the well-being, of the public generally so that the public has an interest in its suppression². There are many categories of people escalating these vices but undertaken mainly by those disguising as witch doctors and trafficking agents with the intent to exploit a community's cultural beliefs, their fears, or helping them to quickly gain wealth.³

In the African Charter and even in Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child therein, life is affirmed as sacred and something that should be preserved. The act of mutilating and sacrificing children, however, is a dangerous violation to the affirmation that life is valuable. The current death rate among victims of child sacrifice is 90%, and those who survive are only 10%, not able to live normal lives again because their body parts have been cut off.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) provides for rights of a universal application to all regardless of their age. It therefore summarily requires Uganda and other African countries to ensure that the right to life of all persons (inclusive of Children) is protected and that any degrading or inhumane treatment against them is discouraged.

² (R V Peel [1943] 2 ALLER 99) (Para 1. Halsbury Laws Volume II(1) Fourth Edition).

³ Uganda Police Force Criminal Investigations Directorate, Child Sacrifice and abduction Overview Report, 2009

Prevalence:

There is a varying prevalence of Child Sacrifice and abduction among countries. In the 21st century, such practices have been reported in Nigeria, Uganda, Swaziland, Liberia, Tanzania, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Mali, Benin, Sierra Leone, DRC, Niger, and Ghana. Data in Support of Draft Resolution of the Human Rights Council on the Elimination of Harmful Practices Related to Manifestation of Belief in Witchcraft (September 2019), showed that over a 10-year period spanning 2009 to 2019, several countries experienced between 300 and 1,000 with accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks, some of which ended in killings.

The same research revealed that ritual attacks against persons with albinism have also been recorded in at least 28 African countries over the last decade. In Tanzania, for instance, at least 30 individuals were reportedly murdered in the year 2008 alone. In some instances, these body parts have not been successfully sold but found in the possession of perpetrators seeking a hard-to-find market at which to sell body parts. Each year, an estimated 600,000 to 800,000 men, women, and children are trafficked across international borders (some international and non-governmental organizations place the number far higher), and the trade is growing.

United States Department of State Annual Country Report on Human Rights Practices for African Countries (2020) reveals widespread violations of children's rights relating to witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks. The African Network for the Prevention and Protection against Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN) reported that almost 3,000 children disappear from their homes every year⁴. According to Child Sacrifice and Mutilations (2010) in Uganda report, on average, *a child is sacrificed every week* and such cases are underreported in communities of Uganda. At least 40,000 children a year are estimated to be victims of trafficking in Benin, according to

the U.N. children's agency UNICEF, although the latest data is a decade old⁵. According to the latest figures shared by the [International Committee of the Red Cross \(ICRC\)](#) 64,000 cases of disappeared persons have been reported across Africa. In Nigeria alone, over 25,000 people have been reported missing. Almost 14,000 or more than half of the missing are children.

On the other hand, sources like the US Department of State (2009) suggest that Uganda has become an international hub for human trafficking with an ever-increasing sale of children in the east of the country for their body parts – a position which government of Uganda did not dispute.

According to African Child Policy Forum (ACPF) report 2022, "*Uncovering our Hidden Shame Addressing Witchcraft Accusations and Ritual Attacks*". Highlights witchcraft accusations are widespread across the continent of Africa (though they vary in extent over time and from place to place).

Ladies and gentlemen, this gruesome mutilation is a deep-rooted social, economic, and cultural phenomenon in many communities and is frequently performed by witch doctors or trafficking agents for communities experiencing socioeconomic issues. It is believed that integrating human body parts with traditional medicines makes a very potent concoction that treats all diseases and provides solutions to many other community problems. In other instances, semi-urban communities carry out organ harvesting for economic gains. Experience in Uganda over the years shows that the demand for human body parts is driven by community members seeking solutions to a host of problems that include the treatment of illnesses, receiving blessings from ancestors, seeking, or increasing wealth, fertility enhancement, increasing the chances of pregnancy and predetermination of the sex of fetus, among many others.

⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-benin-trafficking-nigeria-idUSKBN1E9207>

The life of the victim vs. life in the victim

Ladies and gentlemen, this is the worst manifestation of violence to humanity because the body parts are cut while children are still alive. Child sacrifice is a complex, terrifying, and gruesome experience for victims and their families. Children who survive often face long-term mental, physical, and social problems, including fear and stigma from the community (see sample cases below). Others have become physically handicapped as they lost parts of their bodies to sacrifices. Survivors of child sacrifice show severe symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). I remember it took me over a year to recover from a traumatic experience and lack of sleep after a child died in my hands on our way to the hospital during a rescue in communities.

Case sample,

Joy not real name who is in the care. When she was only one year old, Joy was abducted and given to a witch doctor who held her in his shrine for a year and a half. She was tortured and abused for rituals. Her teeth were pulled out. Her tongue was cut. Her blood was regularly drained. Joy was then put into a bag, her little body thrown into a swamp. A passer-by heard her faint cries and found her. She had malaria and was so malnourished that she had to spend weeks in hospital.

Joy's captors kept her in a shrine for nearly a year, not giving her enough food and water to survive. "They tied her hands together and her legs... they put a cloth into her mouth so she couldn't make noise," says the rescue team. During this time, she was routinely cut and drained of her blood which was used in ritualistic concoctions, after which her kidnappers discarded her in the bush leaving her for dead. Miraculously, Joy was discovered before it was too late. But

due to her sustained blood loss, she incurred profound injuries which has left her permanently, mentally, and physically disabled.

In short, belief in the supernatural in Uganda has influenced commerce, politics, and governance, with believers relying on it as the quickest and easiest means to success.

Own Perspective

Since time immemorial, human beings the world over have sought answers to the vexing questions of their origins, sickness, death and after death; and how to protect themselves from such mysterious events. In my opinion, phenomena of child sacrifice are as a result of social norm and harmful beliefs in witchcraft and quick wealth. Each child and family victim faces unique and diverse traumatic experiences and peculiar challenges, so are the coping mechanisms, where coping ever occurs.

There is need to confront harmful beliefs fuelled by witchdoctors, diviners, sorcerers and traffickers but also need for society to feel they are manipulated by social and environmental forces. Efforts to address root-causes of poverty would empower communities so that they are not victimised.

Reports also show children of suspected sacrificers – notably witchdoctors, as traumatised and shunned by the community, which always destroy their property and banish them from the village. Sometimes the quest for justice for victims results into more harm to the suspects' families. After imprisonment, their children end-up on streets, dropping-out of school and finally become a danger to communities. We need to cut-short this vicious cycle of poverty and violence over generations.

Losing a child to kidnappers come with a heavy financial burden for the child's family even if the child ends up being found alive.

My appeal:

Ladies and gentlemen, a crime is inimical to the moral sense of the community and justice would therefore demand that, a corollary Penal Provision or a law is enacted to match the needs of the public to safeguard its morality.

While there is no country that has expressly defined or created express laws on child sacrifice except only Uganda. I worked with legislators to formulate a law through which cases of child sacrifice are prosecuted. However, in most countries, cases of child sacrifice are not prosecuted, and survivors never receive justice. Similarly, child sacrifice has not be included under the global categories of trafficking nevertheless 90% of children who experience this act die and only 10% survive.

Child sacrifice is illegal because it constitutes the unlawful cause of death of another person. Regardless of whether it is a social or customary practice, it endangers the life of children, which is guaranteed under the Constitution and several other international instruments as pointed out.

Child sacrifice is not simply murder. It is a complex crime that does not simply start and end with murder, but involves kidnap, trafficking, murder, mutilation, extraction of body parts and fluids, and concealment of remains. Child sacrifice leaves deep and long-term psychosocial and economic wounds on survivors and families.

The offence of child sacrifice manifests extreme indifference to value of human life and disregard to human life should be accompanied by a commensurate measure condemning all active and passive participants in the heinous act.

Distinguished members and guests, this is a call to action for everyone within this room to care, protect and advocate for the rights of children. It is more harmful if we witness violence against children and we say nothing. With your support and the contribution of every stakeholder, we can go further than we imagined ending child sacrifice and trafficking in Africa. I challenge every person in this room, to change the narrative and expand the story of the communities in Africa. To finish, I ask if not you, who? And if not now, when? Thank you.