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The Plight of Albino in Tanzania: What should be done?

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1. INTRODUCTION

Globally a right to life is described as the most important of all human rights. Nationally this right has been enshrined under the Article 14 of the Constitution of Tanzania. Its violation includes among other things, any kind of action which results into taking someone's life.

Albinism is a genetically inherited disorder resulting from inability to produce melanin, a dark pigment that colors skin, hair and eyes; this situation leaves the affected people colored hence becoming different from others. For some time now Tanzanians have been witnessing a wave of brutal killings of people with albinism, commonly known as albinos.

At least 54 Tanzanian albinos were reported murdered between 2007 and 2009, with most of the killings taking place in the remote northwest regions of Shinyanga and Mwanza. The high rate of

these killings calls for necessary actions to their ending.

This policy brief is based on the opinions provided by people who participated in online TAKNET forum where the topic "The Plight of Albinos in Tanzania: What should be done" was discussed. The discussion was conducted for the period of three months i.e. January - April 2009. Using both Kiswahili and English the contributions were done freely and interactively under the ESRF moderation.

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE DISCUSSION

The objective of this discussion topic was to provide the public with a platform to contribute their opinion and experiences on the emerged wave of albino killings. Specifically it wanted to know their views on the possible root causes of the killings i.e. the motive behind the killing; effectiveness of measures which

were taken by the government and what other measures or policies they think if taken could help to end the killing. and hence give the basis for policy recommendations.

3. RESULTS

Majority of TAKNET contributors seems to be aware of right to life and they do agree that people with albinism are also human beings and that not only killing but also discriminating them is against human rights.

I: The Root Cause of Albino Killings:

Contributors to the discussion pointed out a number of factors that could be the root cause of rising rate of albino's killings. Broadly, the reasons can be grouped into three categories, socio-cultural, economic and political factors.

Social-cultural Factors

It was argued that some of Tanzanian societies are still

embracing some socio-cultural aspects which discriminate people with certain abnormalities and disabilities. Albinism for quite some times now has been carrying a wrong connotation since it is associated with an ill-conceived belief that it reflects prevalence of a curse and misfortune in many societies.

It seems that this belief is still strong even in modern times as proven by some TAKNET contributors. According to Mr. Deus Kibamba, it is this ill-belief that makes people kill or facilitate the plans of killing albino. In some cases parents and relatives of albinos were reported to collaborate with killers.

“.....Kwa mtizamo wangu, mauaji ya albino ni suala la kihistoria zaidi na linahitaji mtizamo mpana kuliko kuangalia sababu za kiuchumi. Mauaji haya yamekuwapo na yamekuwa yakifanyika kwa albino tangu wakiwa watoto wachanga kwa kuamini kuwa hawatakiwi katika jamii. Tumekuwa tukisikia hata wazee wanadai kuwa albino hafi na hazikwi na ndio maana ukiuliza watu wengi iwapo wanatambua kaburi la albino ninaamini itakuwa mwanzo wa hadithi nydingi zitakazo kuchanganya...”. Mr. Kibamba.

As was reported by BBC News, majority of albino killings happened in Tanzania have been associated with superstitious,

specifically motivated by witchdoctors peddling a get-rich potion made from the legs, hair, hands and blood of albinos . This view was also supported by Delaney, J Epoch (2008) who reported that in a most gruesome trade that is fueled by superstition, poverty and greed, people with albinism are being hunted and butchered for their body parts which are being sold to witch doctors for making wealth bringing- medicine .

Most of the killings were reported to have taken place in the remote northwest regions of Shinyanga and Mwanza, where superstition runs deep. As far as TAKNET discussion is concerned, 73.3% of contributors supported the superstition as one of the root cause of albino killings in Tanzania. As narrated by Mr. Japhet Maingu Makongoro, people believe that they can become rich when they use some traditional medicines mixed with some body parts of albino.

Ignorance was mentioned as another cause of the Albino killings in Tanzania. According to Mr. Besha, majority of Tanzania are illiterate and this contributes to the existing beliefs in superstition and hence continue to put albino in danger of being killed. The adult literacy rate of 65.9% for female and 79.0% for male is not low for people to have high belief on such wicked beliefs. Therefore,

further study is required in order to determine the relationship between people's ignorance and their belief in witchcraft and superstitions.

Economic Factors:

Makongoro J.M. linked the superstition to people's economic status because he believes that people facing economic hardship are more compelled to engage in evil things including killing fellow human in order to become rich. He also supported the argument that the widened income gap has been source of many evils including the albino killings that are currently experienced.

In Tanzania the GINI Coefficient showed the income gap of 0.35 in 2007 . This means that the gap between rich and poor is very big hence leaving room for crime like killing to thrive. Quoting the first Tanzanian president, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, Mr. Makongoro commented that if this gap keeps on widening, then we should expect more evils than the ones we are witnessing now.

“.....Mwalimu Nyerere alishawahi kusema kuwa endapo pengo kati ya walionacho na wasionacho litaachiwa kuongezeka, mlipuko wa maovu utatokea, na tutegemee kuona maovu zaidi ndani ya jamii yetu ya Tanzania, maovu zaidi ya haya tuyaonayo sasa....” Maingu Makongo.

Political Factors

From political point of view, some contributors argued that persistent killing of albino was also facilitated by lack of will of some political leaders to stop the killings. They also felt that the problem was not given its due priority by the government as there was no formal government declaration to condemn the killings.

II: Effectiveness of the Measure taken so far:

A number of measures, both nationally and internationally have been taken to address this problem. Internationally the International Police (Interpol) has been involved to manhunt the suspected human body parts traffickers in different countries. Furthermore well renown campaigners like the Canadian albino businessman Peter Ash (Under the Same Sun Programme) have initiated campaign against albino killings in the country.

At national level, the government has established a number of strategies to identify people involved in this business. The government started by appointing a legislative member who will be representing albinos' issues at national level. Other measures taken include the establishment of a secret ballot- strategy whereby people are required to secretly cast ballots for the people known to be involved in killing

and selling of albino. In addition to that, security committees have been formed at ward and village levels specifically to protect albinos. Each committee is assigned a specific number of albinos and their houses to protect.

As a result of above measures, a total of 90 people had been arrested and taken to court in connection to the killing of Albino people in the country in the period between June 2007 and March 2009. Among these, 9 cases had already been taken to High Court in Shinyanga municipality and the court had given ruling on only two cases whereby a total of 7 people were given death sentence.. About 17 cases were still under investigation in the Lake Zone.

In analyzing the effectiveness of different measure that were taken against albino killings, contributors had mixed feelings. They viewed some measures to be effective while others not. For instance, Mr. Besha criticized the use of secret ballot-strategy as it was the weakest of all measures taken because it proved failure when it was used to identify robbers in the country. Mr. Festo Maro argued that the appointment of a legislative member to represent albino was seen more passive than active and it was an additional cost in running the parliament. On the other hand he

supported the establishment of village committees and the efforts made to bring the accused to the court but questioned the slow speed at which these cases were being attended.

III: What should be done?

In answering this question contributors suggested a number of measures that if taken could help the country to solve this problem. Among the suggested measures include: The need for the government to improve the country's economy and equality in income distribution in order to reduce all types of crime; a thorough research/ study is needed in order to establish the root causes of albino killings and hence come up with a lasting solutions.

Furthermore, institutions like WLAC, TWLA, LHRC, TGNP etc. need to be more active and take enough measures in condemning and stopping albinos' killings as well as rising public awareness on human rights in general and albino in particular. Strengthening the established village security committees and training of households with albino on how to protect them. The albino killing cases should be given priority in courts.

4. CONCLUSION

The importance of ending the albino killings to the national development does not need to

be overemphasized. There are many and different factors that make people kill albinos and the solution to this problem therefore need different measures to be taken.

5: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A number of issues were raised in the discussion, which suggest some specific measures by the government and other relevant stakeholders as per the following main recommendations:

1. Despite all measures introduced by the government in fighting against albino killings, there is a need for society as a whole to be involved in this battle instead of depending much on police and the human right institutions alone. The society at household level can be the most reliable security guards for these people.
2. If the killings have to be stopped, a combined effort from all stakeholders i.e. the government, CSOs e.t.c is needed and the role of each stakeholder should be specified.
3. A massive education/ behavior change campaign is required so as to eliminate peoples' ignorance and remove the widespread myth that being albino is a curse and that albinos' body parts has the power of bringing wealth. The trainings should be both formal and informal so as to make sure that all people in the society get the intended change in mind set and behaviour.
4. The already established organizations, measures and strategies dealing with the needs of albino should be strengthened and extended to all rural and urban areas in order to fulfill their objectives.
5. Policy makers should look into the possibility of reviewing legal laws and other legislations to address

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