

Nairobi, July 26th, 2010— Tens of thousands of children, some as young as four years old, are being accused of "crimes" of witchcraft in Africa, according to a new report, which examines the consequences for the societies they live in.

Unicef's Children Accused of Witchcraft report which was released last week looks at a number of case studies across the East African region and in particular the recent killing of albino children in Tanzania.

The media, and more recently Internet sites in various regions of Africa regularly report shocking figures on the number of violent acts against children, that are related to witchcraft.

Unicef acknowledges that executions of alleged witches have reached alarming levels in a number of African countries including Botswana, Cameroon, Ghana, Namibia, Nigeria and Tanzania.

There has been no comprehensive study to suggest how widespread child witchcraft allegations are, or the number of children who have been beaten or killed, but experts believe the numbers are in their thousands or tens of thousands.

Unicef's regional child protection officer for West and Central Africa Joaquim Theis said more than 20,000 street children had been accused of witchcraft in the DR Congo capital Kinshasa alone.

The report says thousands of elderly people, especially women, have been accused of witchcraft and then beaten and/or killed in Tanzania.

In western regions of Kenya 15 women accused of witchcraft were recently burnt to death by angry villagers. The report says the existence of such violence requires that a number of distinctions be made. "First, that there is a difference between belief in witchcraft and accusations of witchcraft. The fact of believing in witchcraft, that is, in the extraordinary power of certain people, does not pose any particular problems."

According to Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

The report also notes that, witchcraft accusations that end in extreme violence require a different response. "Not only do such acts pose serious problems for civil society and African state institutions, but also for those who defend human rights."

The report says the most common age for witchcraft accusations is between four and 14 years old. Unlike in medieval times in Europe or in the 19th and early 20th century in Africa, the studies indicate that witchcraft accusations target mostly boys.

Several news articles published recently on the Internet reveal the extreme discrimination and violence against people with albinism, (who are believed to possess magic powers supposedly contained in parts of their bodies) especially in Burundi and Tanzania, but also in Côte d'Ivoire, DRC, Kenya, Senegal and Zimbabwe.

In Cameroon, Jean Jacques Ndoudoumou, President of the World Association for the Defence and Solidarity of Albinos (Asmodisa), explains: "People think we are magical creatures, that we've come back from the dead as a punishment by God for something we did in our previous life."

In contrast with the "child witches," albino children are attacked and killed in order to make people more powerful, rich and prosperous.

Certain body parts, such as the skin, tongue, hands, ears, skull, heart and genital organs are believed to have magical powers and are used to make potions and charms.

These body parts are sometimes called "spare parts" and are commercially traded. Albinos are especially prized on the occult market, the report says. Multiple anthropological studies have reported this trade in Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania and Zambia.

Most authors believe the phenomenon is directly related to globalisation, the arrival of capitalism and the market, production, consumerism, as well as development policies. It integrates the mysteries of economic growth, the accumulation of wealth and of the general impoverishment of populations. The Unicef report questions those who say that a belief in witches is part of "African tradition".

"While it is true that certain ancient practices have been maintained, then adapted to contemporary contexts, other practices that appear to be ancient or claim to be are often of very recent origin," the report says. "Such is the case of the sale of body parts or the mainly urban phenomenon of children accused of witchcraft. According to the most recent anthropological studies, witchcraft and the sacrifice of people with albinism cannot be interpreted solely in terms of "African tradition." It is a "new" tradition or an "invented tradition."

The spread of democracy, capitalism and the free market have also democratised the occult. Today, everything is for sale: charms, talismans, magic powders and potions, some apparently made from body parts.

In some countries, such as Burundi, Uganda and Tanzania, albino body parts appear to be particularly highly prized, because they can be used to make potions and magic charms that enhance wealth.

But why is the belief in witchcraft growing even as Africa modernises and becomes a much more integral part of the world economy? Unicef says that life in the city, paid employment, consumerism, financial pressure and an emerging individualism "have all led to profound transformations in family structures.

"The result is a dysfunctional family and a disruption of relations between age groups - in particular the legitimacy of parental authority - and between men and women. The changes that have been introduced through development are therefore a challenge to African solidarity.

"Accusations of witchcraft against children can also be a direct consequence of this inability of families to meet their basic needs. In addition to these economic and political crises, and general impoverishment, there are also institutional crises to consider, such as inadequate health services, weak legal system, and the role of civil society."

The study aims to clarify the basis for certain social practices that are wholly or partially misunderstood by western observers.

Behaviours commonly associated with accusations of witchcraft include violence, mistreatment, abuse, infanticide and the abandonment of children. From a western perspective, such practices are violations of the rights of children.

Unicef says that the objective of its report is to understand both the complexity and the variety of the phenomena described, as well as the causes, which are not only cultural and social, but also economic and political.

The study targets child protection agencies and aims to promote better understanding of local representations and beliefs, as well as to provide guidance on effective child protection interventions.

Children accused of witchcraft are subject to psychological and physical violence, first by family members and their circle of friends, then by church pastors or traditional healers. They are stigmatised and discriminated for life. Increasingly vulnerable and caught in a cycle of accusation, they risk further accusations of witchcraft.

Children accused of witchcraft may be killed, although more often they are abandoned by their parents and live on the street. A large number of street children have been accused of witchcraft within the family circle. These children are more vulnerable to physical and sexual violence and to abuse by the authorities.

In order to survive and to escape appalling living conditions, they use drugs and alcohol. Often victims of sexual exploitation, they are at increased risk of exposure to sexually transmitted diseases and HIV infection.