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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by International Humanist and Ethical Union, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

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Witchcraft-related human rights abuses

In some communities, to be labelled a ‘witch’ is tantamount to receiving a death sentence. An alternative fate might involve banishment, stigmatization, or torture. The reasons driving witchcraft allegations vary across countries and beliefs, but some features are widely shared. These are acts born out of anger and powerlessness at the inability to manage the seemingly random negative forces governing one’s life. Sometimes these attacks are legitimised and encouraged by religious leaders or spiritual ‘healers’ for their own financial gain. Victims typically belong to marginalised groups with limited resources to fight back against the accusations.

Exact numbers of victims are unknown, as many instances go unreported and unmonitored by official bodies. It is estimated that each year there are at least thousands of cases of witchcraft accusations globally, often with fatal consequences. During one week in 2019, in India alone, a boy murdered his aunt after accusing her of witchcraft; a man was set on fire after a 10-year-old girl fell sick; and six men alleged to be witches had their teeth pulled out and were force-fed excrement.

It is likely that the COVID-19 pandemic will encourage more witchcraft accusations. As anti-witchcraft abuse activist Leo Igwe explains: “[Pandemics] create situations of fear, uncertainty and desperation. This constitutes a sub soil for the proliferation of superstition and irrationalism.” Witch-hunts in the past have been triggered by public health crises such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic or the Ebola outbreak. Already, there are reports that suggest COVID-19 has led to a surge of witchcraft accusations against Dalit women in India.

Witchcraft abuses as serious human rights violations

The effects of witchcraft accusations are marked by extreme violence, and include acts of human trafficking, human sacrifice, mutilation, torture and killing. Such violations cut across a range of rights protected under international human rights law, including the right to life, the right not to be subject to torture or cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment, the right not to be subject to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile, and the right not to be discriminated against on the grounds of a protected characteristic.

For children, the stigma can mean a lifetime of physical and psychological trauma. Victims may be denied access to medical treatment by doctors, refused an education by teachers, and are undoubtedly denied a flourishing family or community life as a result of being persecuted. For elderly women in Northern Ghana, being accused of witchcraft may result in their exile to segregated camps, which are “effectively prisons” with their harsh living conditions.

Origins of witchcraft persecution

Witchcraft-related persecution is a relatively recent phenomenon dating back 10-20 years. It partially originates from the neoliberal policies imposed on many developing states’ economies by global institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, which brought about harsh austerity regimes and uprooted communities. As Dr. Ogembo has argued in the Kenyan context, after Kenya structurally adjusted its economy, unemployment reached unprecedented levels, basic commodities became unavailable and state subsidies for education, health and public transport were abandoned. As many households were thrown into deprivation, they sought an explanation for their misfortune by nurturing the belief that they were victims of a supernatural conspiracy.

Witchcraft accusations are also undoubtedly exploited and fuelled by the actions of prominent religious figures. In some African states, this role is fulfilled by Christian fundamentalists connected to the Pentecostal Church. Pentecostalism lends itself particularly well to belief in witchcraft: sermons take place in a highly charged atmosphere of prayers, trances, and healing rituals, while preachers emphasise spiritual warfare and the notion that the success due to every good Christian can be blocked by an evil force, which a witch-finder can exorcise.

The persecution of alleged witches is a lucrative business. Religious leaders are able to charge exorbitant fees for the performance of exorcisms, and trumpeting witchcraft accusations brings not only money but serves as a form of advertising, attracting new congregants and clients. Some religious figures have attained immense wealth and large followings as a result of their witch-hunting services.

The prevalence of witch-hunting is also closely linked to a lack of healthcare in rural areas. In parts of India, “witches” are selected by travelling tantric “healers”, who make a living from selling cures and conducting purification ceremonies. The lack of nearby doctors and health services effectively means that consulting a traditional healer may be the only option for families seeking medical advice.

Victims of witchcraft persecution

Victims of witchcraft persecution belong to marginalised groups with limited resources to fight back against accusations, due to their age, gender, caste or possession of a disability. For a woman, the most dangerous situation in a society with witchcraft beliefs is to be viewed as economically unproductive and transgressive of the cultural norm. Older women, particularly those living on land by themselves, are often accused by younger members of their community. In India, for example, men who brand women as witches exploit the caste system and patriarchal culture to oust women from valuable land.

This same logic applies to children. Children accused of witchcraft have typically lost one or both parents and will either be living with relatives or on the streets, where they may be perceived as a nuisance, or as violent, and can easily become scapegoats for the community’s ills. Fundamentalist Christian pastor-preachers play a pernicious role when it comes to witchcraft accusations against children, often painting children as a personification of the “Devil” and forcefully “healing” them. As the United Nations Children's Fund reports, during this “healing”:

“children are isolated in the churches for a period ranging from a few days to several months. During this time, they are forced to fast, deprived of food and water for such long periods that some children die. The treatment can also consist of swallowing potions, administering perfume, spiced sauces, as well as injecting petrol in the eyes or ears. They are also often beaten.

Cases of children accused of witchcraft have been documented in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (in Kinshasa and Lubumbashi), Angola (Zaire Province, Uíge and Luanda) and Nigeria (Akwa Ibom State).

People with disabilities also constitute a vulnerable group, as a lack of understanding around the causes of mental illnesses and developmental disorders feeds the misconception that these illnesses are a manifestation of ‘witchcraft’. The proliferation of unregulated ‘occult economies’ pose considerable danger to individuals living with albinism. In Malawi and the United Republic of Tanzania, people living with albinism are mutilated and killed to facilitate illegal trade in their body parts, which are believed to bring good luck.

Limitations of existing approaches

Despite the severity of these crimes, there is often no robust state response. Few countries have the right legislation in place to monitor and tackle witchcraft abuses. Where legislation does exist, weak judicial systems often fail to investigate or prosecute abuses, in part because these crimes frequently occur in deprived areas where enforcement of the law is weak. The deep-rooted belief in witchcraft presents a significant cultural barrier to enforcement, as witnesses and officials can be unwilling to participate in investigations for fear of being seen as ‘protecting’ an alleged witch.

Where governments have taken action, policies that fail to tackle the root of the problem of witchcraft belief can do more harm than good. For example, Ghana's rush to dismantle its witch camps following accusations of squalid living conditions and human rights abuses have

endangered many vulnerable women by leaving them with no option but to return to the communities that banished them in the first place.

Recommendations

The Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions wrote in 2009 that “while there has been a steady trickle of reports from civil society groups alleging the persecution and killing of persons accused of being witches, the problem has never been addressed systematically in the context of human rights.” The lack of a normative framework to conceptualize, monitor or respond to such violations means that the situation today is not much different. While local activists have campaigned for years to educate and dispel myths of harmful witchcraft beliefs, the international community has not mobilized in turn.

In light of this, we issue the following recommendations:

- We urge the Council to adopt a resolution on witchcraft-related human rights violations recognising the severe nature of these abuses and emphasising that those who make witchcraft accusations are exploiting conditions of structural poverty and misogyny.
 - We ask that the relevant Special Procedures of the Council highlight and investigate the issue of witchcraft-related human rights abuses in their reports.
 - As witchcraft accusations are likely to be a “hidden” consequence of the pandemic, States should issue guidance to local authorities in regions where witchcraft accusations are prevalent and urge authorities to take preventative action to protect individuals who are most at risk.
 - States should, on an ongoing basis, ensure that appropriate care, rehabilitation, and compensation is provided to victims of witchcraft accusations to help restore their human rights and their dignity.
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