



**Report on witchcraft-related human rights abuses in Africa, submitted to the 67th
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email: office@humanists.international

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¹ <https://humanists.international/what-is-humanism/the-amsterdam-declaration/>

Report on witchcraft-related human rights abuses in Africa

On 20 May 2020, in the Boki Local Government Area in Cross River State, Nigeria, 15 individuals were rounded up by a mob, doused with gasoline and burned alive. 3 people died as a result of this horrific attack, while others sustained serious burns and will be disabled for the rest of their lives.² The attack came down to the fact that the victims were accused of practising 'witchcraft'. The stigma of this accusation meant that they were treated as if they were not human beings deserving of empathy and basic human rights.

This recent attack is reflective of the situation in some communities across Africa, where to be labelled a 'witch'³ is tantamount to receiving a death sentence. An alternative fate might involve banishment, stigmatization or torture. Routine assaults on so-called 'witches', often with deadly consequences, have been recorded in Nigeria, Ghana,⁴ Kenya,⁵ Malawi,⁶ South Africa,⁷ Cameroon,⁸ Tanzania,⁹ The Democratic Republic of the Congo,¹⁰ Zambia¹¹ and Uganda.¹² Exact numbers of victims are unknown, as many instances go unreported and unmonitored by official bodies.

It is likely that the Covid-19 pandemic will lead to an increase in witchcraft accusations.¹³ As Leo Igwe¹⁴ explains: "[Pandemics] create situations of fear, uncertainty and desperation. This constitutes a sub soil for the proliferation of superstition and irrationalism."¹⁵ Numerous witch-hunts in the past have been triggered by public health crises such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic or the Ebola outbreak.¹⁶

Witchcraft abuses as serious human rights violations

² <http://saharareporters.com/2020/06/30/governor-ayade-and-witch-burning-cross-river-state-leo-igwe>

³ In this statement we use the word "witch" to mean 'a person who is believed to cause harm by supernatural means'. However, we remain aware of the limitations of the term, which is of Anglican origin and is inadequate to convey the diversity of witchcraft belief between cultures and the depths of malignant feeling that is usually associated with such a label.

⁴ <http://saharareporters.com/2020/07/24/elderly-woman-beaten-and-lynched-witchcraft-ghana-leo-igwe>

⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-51222194>

⁶ <http://saharareporters.com/2020/07/22/president-chakwera-end-witch-bloodletting-malawi-leo-igwe>

⁷ <https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/limpopo-witchcraft-murder-family-january-2020/>

⁸ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/autism-faces-witchcraft-prejudices-in-cameroon/1700095>

⁹ <https://religionnews.com/2018/08/09/vigilante-killings-in-tanzania-spur-a-hunt-for-witch-hunters/>

¹⁰ <https://www.africanews.com/2018/03/16/the-agony-of-congo-s-child-witches/>

¹¹ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/zambia-murders-of-elderly-accused-of-witchcraft-rise/738203>

¹² <https://ugandaradionetwork.net/story/lc-officials-on-spot-for-leading-mob-attack-against-woman>

¹³ <https://wildhunt.org/2020/07/pandemic-impact-on-witch-hunts.html>

¹⁴ Leo Igwe is an expert on witchcraft accusations and an activist working to end human rights violations associated with witchcraft beliefs, superstition, caste-discrimination and LGBT hate crimes, amongst others. He is founder of the organization Advocacy for Alleged Witches.

¹⁵ <https://humanists.international/2020/04/alleged-witches-are-still-killed-today-in-2020-says-humanist-anti-witchcraft-activist-leo-igwe/>; see also <https://www.modernghana.com/news/991453/covid-19-and-witchcraftexploiting-the-climate.html?fbclid=IwAR3EXg6fZ5UBJbNSjEfYdLutKjZavyOge1avWNODia0qTb7fh0KWXYyvwf4A>

¹⁶ Stepping Stones Nigeria, *Witchcraft Accusations: A Protection Concern for UNHCR and the Wider Humanitarian Community?* (April 2009)

Human rights violations associated with witchcraft accusations are marked by extreme violence, and include acts such as human trafficking, human sacrifice, mutilation, torture and killing. Such violations cut across a range of rights that are protected under international human rights treaties and the African Charter on Human and People's Rights. This includes the right to life¹⁷, the right not to be subject to torture or cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment,¹⁸ the right not to be subject to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile,¹⁹ and the right not to be discriminated against on the grounds of a protected characteristic,²⁰ amongst other core rights.

For children, the stigma can mean a lifetime of physical and psychological trauma. Witchcraft accusation victims may be denied access to medical treatment by doctors, refused an education by teachers, and are undoubtedly denied access to their family or community life as a result of being persecuted and abandoned by both. 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 and lack of access to food, water and medicine.²¹

Origins of witchcraft persecution

The association of witchcraft with human rights abuses is a relatively recent phenomenon dating back 10-20 years.²² This phenomenon is partly explained by economic factors, such as the forced neoliberal restructuring of many African states' political economies by institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, which brought about austerity regimes in many countries, uprooted communities, created an ever-widening wealth gap and generated competition for limited resources.²³ It is also undoubtedly being exploited and fuelled by the actions of certain individuals connected to religious movements.

As Dr. Justus 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 basic services like education, health and public transport were abandoned. As many households were thrown into deprivation they sought an explanation for their sudden misfortune by adopting the belief that they were victims of a supernatural conspiracy.²⁴ In short, witchcraft accusations provide a theory of misfortune when drastic economic changes mean that people lose the ability to exercise control over their own lives.

¹⁷ Article 3, Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 (UDHR); Article 4 African Charter on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR)

¹⁸ Article 4, UDHR; Article 5, ACHPR

¹⁹ Article 9, UDHR; Article 6, ACHPR

²⁰ Article 16, UDHR; Article 2, ACHPR

²¹https://www.actionaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/condemned_without_trial_women_and_witchcraft_in_ghana_report_september_2012.pdf

²² Secker, E., Witchcraft stigmatization in Nigeria: Challenges and successes in the implementation of child rights. *International Social Work* (2013), 56(1), 22-36.

²³ Federici, S., *Witches, Witch-hunting and Women*, PM Press (2018).

²⁴ J. Ogembo, *Contemporary Witch-Hunting in Gusii, Southwestern Kenya*, Edwin Mellen Press Ltd (2006)

There is also no denying the fact that witchcraft persecution is a faith-driven phenomenon. Pentecostalism lends itself particularly well to belief in witchcraft: its followers claim personal experience of a supernatural force, the Holy Spirit; sermons frequently take place in a highly charged atmosphere of singing, prayers, trances, and healing rituals, and preachers will typically emphasise spiritual warfare and the notion that the success which is due to every good Christian can be blocked by an evil force, which a witch-finder is able to drive off or exorcise (for a fee).²⁵

The persecution of alleged witches is a lucrative business. Religious leaders are able to charge exorbitant fees for the performance of exorcisms from desperate families.²⁶ Trumpeting witchcraft accusations brings not only money but serves as a form of advertising, which in turn draws new congregants and clients. In many cases the media also has a role to play in sensationalising and legitimising witchcraft accusations, with popular radio and television programmes describing how witches operate and how they can be identified.

Some religious figures have attained immense wealth and large followings as a result of their witch-hunting services. They will go to extreme lengths to safeguard this illicit source of revenue. Nigeria's most notorious preacher, Helen Ukpabio, is a self-described former witch whose specialty is the detection and exorcism of "child witches". She has repeatedly harassed and brought spurious legal charges against anti-witchcraft persecution activists in Nigeria and in the UK, including a recent attempt to exact payment of 20,000,000,000 Naira (approx. US\$ 52.7 million) in compensation for 'defamation' against her.²⁷

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 strong witchcraft beliefs is to be viewed as economically unproductive as well as transgressive of the cultural norm. For this reason, older women, particularly those living on land by themselves, are often accused by younger members of their community or their families. In Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Ghana and Nigeria, thousands of elderly women have been killed and tortured in gruesome ways, imprisoned, or exiled after being accused of practising witchcraft.²⁸

This same logic applies to children. It is typical for children accused of witchcraft to have lost one or both parents and either be living with extended relatives or simply living on the streets, where they may be perceived as a nuisance, or as violent, and can easily become scapegoats

²⁵ Snow, S., *Explaining Abuse of "Child Witches" in Africa*, Journal of Religion and Society (2017).

²⁶ <https://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/how-nigerias-fear-child-witchcraft-ruins-young-lives>;

<http://www.whrin.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/2017-UNREPORT-final.pdf>;

https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/nigeria_children_witchcraft

²⁷ <https://humanists.international/2020/07/nigerian-humanist-leo-igwe-facing-the-threat-of-spurious-charges/>

²⁸ F. Eboiyehi, *Convicted without Evidence: Elderly Women and Witchcraft Accusations in Contemporary Nigeria*, Journal of International Women's Studies (2017).

for the community's ills.²⁹ Fundamentalist Christian pastor-preachers play an especially pernicious role when it comes to witchcraft accusations against children, often painting children as a personification of the Devil or Satan and taking them away to be "healed". As a UNICEF Report states, during the "healing" process,

"children are sometimes 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.

³⁰

Cases of children being accused of witchcraft have been documented in a number of African states, but most notably take place in the Democratic Republic of Congo (in Kinshasa and Lubumbashi), northern Angola (Zaire Province, Uíge and Luanda) and Nigeria (Akwa Ibom State).³¹

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 Tanzania, people living with albinism are mutilated and killed to facilitate illegal trade in their body parts, which are believed to bring good luck and wealth. This practice is even known to experience increased demand in the lead up to elections.³²

Limitations of existing legislative approaches and the poor response from States

Despite the severity of these human rights violations, there is often no robust state response to witchcraft-related crimes. Prominent members of Government have even at times endorsed the persecution of witches. In 2009, Yahya Jammeh, former President of Gambia, ordered security forces to round up hundreds of "sorcerers" in retribution for the death of his aunt, who he said was killed by witchcraft. Armed forces carried out thousands of deadly "witch hunts" over the next 7 years.³³ In 2017, Malawi's President Peter Mutharika made a similar call to village chiefs to "stamp down" on witchcraft, at the same time as mob violence against suspected "vampires" in two districts resulted in the deaths of six people.³⁴

²⁹ Human Rights Watch, *What Future?: Street Children in the Democratic Republic of the Congo* (4 April 2006)

³⁰ UNICEF, *Children Accused of Witchcraft: An anthropological study of contemporary practices in Africa* (April 2010).

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² <http://www.underthesamesun.com/content/issue/#human-rights-abuse-and-attacks>

³³ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/gambias-dictator-ordered-a-witch-hunt-this-village-is-still-haunted-by-i/2018/05/27/bb8a4fc2-32a9-11e8-b6bd-0084a1666987_story.html

³⁴ https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-malawi-violence/malawi-president-to-crack-down-on-vampires-witchcraft-after-lynchings-idUKKBN1C125Z?fbclid=IwAR2W0uqIT3wJ5mbGcCg4fNude_GwmRpMGq4AOx1MkyACTZW2rrfnWJcDleq

Where governments have sought to address witchcraft persecution, poorly thought out policy that does not tackle the root of the problem of witchcraft belief can do more harm than good. For example, Ghana's push to dismantle its witch camps following accusations of exploitation, squalid living conditions, and human rights abuses have endangered many vulnerable women by leaving them with no option but to return to the very families and communities that sought to banish them in the first place.³⁵

Very few countries have the right legislation in place to monitor and tackle witchcraft abuses. Where legislation does exist, weak judicial systems often fail to prevent, investigate or prosecute abuses, in part because these crimes frequently occur in deprived areas where enforcement of the law is already weak, and the victims are often children or the socially ostracized.³⁶ The deep-rooted belief in witchcraft presents a significant cultural barrier to enforcement, as witnesses and officials can be unwilling to play a role in investigations for fear of being seen as 'protecting' an accused witch.³⁷

Conclusions and Recommendations

Given the complex underlying causes of witchcraft accusations and persecution, crafting a solution will inevitably require a sensitive, multi-pronged approach. In light of this, we issue the following recommendations:

- **We call on the Commission to organize a conference for States and civil society representatives on witchcraft and human rights abuses, with the aim of developing common strategies for tackling the problem.**
- **We urge the Commission to condemn the actions of prominent individuals, including well-known Christian preachers, who exploit the belief in witchcraft and perform exorcisms for personal financial gain.**
- **We urge the Commission to recommend draft wording to States for legislation addressing witchcraft accusations and to promote further regulations on the harmful practices of traditional healers**
- **We urge the Committee For The Prevention Of Torture In Africa to investigate incidents of torture arising from witchcraft accusations and to publish a report of its findings.**
- **We urge the Working Group on Death Penalty, Extra-Judicial, Summary or Arbitrary Killings and Enforced Disappearances in Africa to investigate incidents of arbitrary and extra-judicial killings arising from witchcraft accusations and to publish a report of its findings.**

³⁵ <http://saharareporters.com/2020/07/24/elderly-woman-beaten-and-lynched-witchcraft-ghana-leo-igwe?fbclid=IwAR17Wn7TIZxJa-OZuOnqr3IUJVVWFEXKPhmd1GH0S8gz2Snr262qtLd2qHTA>

³⁶ <http://www.whrin.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Concept-Note-Side-Event-HRC37-VAC-and-witchcraft.pdf>

³⁷ <http://www.a4id.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Using-the-law-to-tackle-accusations-of-witchcraft-HelpAge-Internationals-position-1.pdf>

- **We urge the Working Group on Rights of Older Persons and People with Disabilities to adopt recommendations for overcoming the association of older persons and persons with disabilities with witchcraft practices.**

In addition, we call on the States mentioned in this statement to:

- **Redress the harm done to victims of witchcraft abuse and provide for appropriate care, rehabilitation, compensation and reintegration programmes to victims to help restore their human rights and their dignity.**
- **Increase funding and support for local campaign groups that are dedicated to assisting the victims of witchcraft-related persecution.**
- **Increase funding and support for welfare services, shelters and mental health services for children and the elderly.**
- **Support, fund and develop regional educational programmes working to root out the superstitions underpinning the abusive elements of witchcraft belief.**