WITCHCRAFT KILLINGS

Groups join war against lynch mobs

KNCHR works with lobbies in drive to sensitise public on the sanctity of life

By PATRICK MAYOYO

In Kisii, the worst thing that can happen to you is for somebody to claim that you are either a witch or a criminal.

Within seconds, an irate mob would descend on you with all types of weapons and only leave the scene after ensuring that you are dead.

The alarming rate at which people are being killed for allegedly being witches in different parts of Kisii, Gucha and Nyamira districts has raised concern among human rights activists and religious leaders, who are now calling for stern action against those involved.

Reports indicate that an average of six people are lynched in different parts of Kisii on a monthly basis for allegedly practising witchcraft. Suspected criminals are also not spared.

A number of people, either serving sentences or in remand at Kisii Prison, have declined to go home after being released for fear of being killed by lynch mobs.

The elderly

Most of the people targeted over witchcraft-related claims are mainly the elderly and they are dragged out of their homes by vigilante groups, who then execute them in cold blood. It is related close family members watch helplessly.

The Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR) vice-chairman, Mr Hassan Omar, said the commission was concerned by increased cases of lynching of witchcraft suspects and criminals in Kisii.

“As a commission we have written to security agencies in the area to investigate these cases and take appropriate action because what is happening is criminal and violation of one’s human rights,” he said.

Mr Omar said anybody suspected of committing a crime is deemed innocent until proved guilty by a court of law.

Right to live

“The right to live is non-negotiable and whoever breaches this provision should be held liable,” he said.

Mr Omar said KNCHR was working with different lobby groups to sensitise the public on the sanctity of life and why they should hand over suspects to the police instead of lynching them.

One of the most recent incidents involved the lynching of five suspected witches in Kanusa village, Bomwanda sub-location, Kisii District in February.

According to a relative of one of those killed, Ms Malkine Nyaboe, it was around 3pm when she saw a huge mob singing war songs enter their compound. Before she knew what was happening their houses were set on fire and people alleged to be witches rounded up and burnt.

“I did not believe what I was seeing because I thought I was dreaming. But when I recovered from the shock I could not comprehend what had occurred,” Ms Nyaboe said.

She said those lynched in the incident were Boyani Gichanu, Topsy Enogu, Christopher Ongubo, Sandinni Mageto and Mary Chietunde Agirio.

Ms Nyaboe said the five were killed after a boy who was abducted from his house allegedly mentioned them as the ones behind his kidnapping.

Watched helplessly

Ms Nyaboe, an aunt of Yobeni Ongubo, who was among those lynched, said she had never witnessed such an atrocity since her childhood.

“It was horrifying to see defenceless people being killed senselessly,” she said.

And Evelyn Kemunto, whose mother-in-law Mary Chietunde Agirio, 48, was also killed, said she escaped the wrath of the assailants by a whisker.

“I watched helplessly as my mother-in-law was burnt to ashes without intervention before I was threatened with death if I tried to help,” the bitter Ms Kemunto said.

Mr Christopher Ongubo, who was a church elder, was also not spared by the rampaging killer mob and those who know him are still questioning how he was linked to witchcraft.

Kisii district criminal investigations officer Iria Mohammed said more than 90 people have been arrested in connection with incidents of lynching since the beginning of the year.

“Out of this number 20 have been bonded to keep peace while 10 others are facing murder charges,” he said.

The investigations officer said police will not relent in taking action against those who lynch suspected criminals, saying legal provisions are available to deal with such cases.

“There is a law dealing with witchcraft and anybody with information about suspected witches should pass it over to law enforcement agencies to take action instead of lynching the suspects,” he said.

Mr Mohammed said police will act firmly against those who violate the rights of others through what he termed “mob justice”.

“Anybody who kills a suspected criminal will face the full force of the law just like any other criminals,” he said.

Bishop Joseph Mairura of Kisii Catholic Church said witchcraft suspicions have no place in the society.

He also said those lynched in the incident are guilty or innocent, court of law to determine whether they are guilty or innocent,” he said.

Bishop Mairura condemned the youths against being used to kill suspected criminals in the name of fighting crime.

MPs Richard Onyonya (Kisumu West) and Dr Robert Monda (Nyaribari Chache) criticised increased incidents of lynching in their constituencies.

They urged area residents to report criminals to the police.

Mr Onyonya said those mastering the executions should be prosecuted to avert the practice.

“You are criminal to kill somebody in the name of fighting crime and those responsible should not be spared,” he said.

To suppress cases of lynching, Dr Monda said there was need for people to be sensitised on the importance of obeying the law.

Nyamar provincial police officer Anthony Kibich said more than 27 suspects have been arrested in connection with killings in Kisii, adding that more would be arraigned in court on completion of investigations.

He denied reports that police took long to arrive at the scene of lynching, saying they act swiftly whenever they receive information about such incidents.

Mr Kibich asked the public to desist from engaging in extra-judicial killings and instead report criminals to the police.

Lynchings cases in the region

The worst case of lynching in the larger Kisii area took place in May last year when 15 people were butchered for allegedly practising witchcraft.

The incident took place in Kegogi and Nyakayo villages, where more than 50 houses were razed by rampaging mobs. Eleven bodies were found in the burnt houses in Kegogi while four others were found in Nyamira District. Trouble is said to have started when a list of suspected witches and wizards was found at Nyamasaria Primary School.

Members of a vigilante group were blamed for the killings.

One of the most recent incidents saw five people being killed in February in Bomwanda sub-location, Kisii District. They were lynch after they were linked to the abduction of a boy.

On May 2, three young men accused of being criminals were dragged from their houses in Nyanzago and Botori villages before being brutally killed.

On April 20, a man suspected to be a thief was lynched by a mob at Magenche location in Gucha District. The suspect was allegedly found breaking into a house Gucha deputy police boss Ronald Lomodooni said incidents of lynching crime suspects in the area were on the rise.

In 2007, several people were killed on allegations of practising witchcraft or committing crime in Kisii.

In October, two men were lynched by suspected members of a vigilante group in Kegogo division in Kisii.

In the first case, Mr Dunson Nyanzu Ongwanga was abducted from his kiosk at 11pm after the gang fired several times in the air to scare away villagers.

His body was found at Aharine shopping centre on the Kisii-Kilgoris road with deep cuts in the head, neck, hands, back and stomach.

In the second case, the body of Mr Charles Machini, 50, was found on a footpath, three kilometres from his Nyaguta village home. The body had cold cuts on the back.

And in September of the same year, two people were lynched in Borubad Division of Masaba District on suspicion they were cattle rustlers.

The two were set upon by villagers with spears and stones, killing them on the spot.

In August of the same year, three brothers and their two relatives were lynched in Kisii District after being suspected of being robbers.

Their bodies were found on a footpath at Nyamonom village in the neighbouring Gucha District by milk sellers. Their limbs were tied with ropes. According to relatives, a gang of more than 50 people dressed in police uniforms flushed them out of their houses at 1:30am before killing them.

- Patrick Mayojo