

UGANDA: Refusal to convert to Islam ends in family tragedy

World Watch Monitor (30.01.2018) – <http://bit.ly/2Gw2qA0> – A Christian woman has been brutally attacked with a machete by her Muslim husband for refusing to convert to his religion, sources told World Watch Monitor. The attack led to the death of the woman's one-week-old twins.

Regina Navatovu, 35, lived with her husband, Asuman Sekidde, in Bumogolo village in the south of Uganda. When Navatovu conceived in 2017, Sekidde claimed the children were not his and accused his wife of having an affair. Sekidde had started to threaten to hurt his wife before moving to Kalangala, more than 100km away, in Lake Victoria.

The twins were born on 18 December and Navatovu made contact with her husband to let him know. Sekidde returned on 22 December and that night attacked his wife and the newly-born children with a machete.

Neighbours helped take the mother and children to a local hospital. One of the twins died from a loss of blood, the other was unable to be kept warm by the unconscious mother and died from hypothermia, reported the Ugandan Daily Monitor. Navatovu lost her right hand and some fingers from her left hand in the attack.

Dr. Mark Juuko, a spokesman for Masaka Hospital, told local media that Navatovu was "still very weak and deeply

traumatised". He added that she was able to explain what happened but needs "much emotional support".

"The local media reported that this was a case of proven adultery, but the real issue was not the paternity of the babies, it was about faith," World Watch Monitor's source said.

"Soon after they married, Sekidde started trying to get [his wife] to convert to Islam, but she kept resisting. This caused many disagreements between them. He only used the pregnancy as an excuse to try to get rid of her. In the recent past we have noticed an increase in domestic violence cases in households where Christian women are married to Muslims," the source added.

Sekidde has been arrested and charged. He allegedly confessed to local reporters that he "hatched the attack [on his wife] hours before executing it", and that he "wanted to cut off all [her] hands to teach her a lesson".

Uganda is just outside the top 50 countries where persecution of Christians is most severe, according to the charity Open Doors' 2018 World Watch List. The rise in radical Islamic activities in Uganda has created an environment of intolerance in the country, leaving Christians fearful of persecution, Open Doors said in its latest report.

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CHINA: Chinese bishop reshuffle reinforces fears of state meddling

World Watch Monitor (30.01.2018) – <http://bit.ly/2BHsjKj> – Fears are growing that China's communist government may be gaining more control over the Catholic Church there, as news emerged that the Vatican asked two bishops it had appointed to step aside in favour of ones selected by Beijing.

These developments have taken place following a state campaign against China's Protestant churches, involving the removal of crosses from up to 2,000 churches and even the demolition of churches, and as a raft of new restrictions on religious practice come into force this week in the name of curbing extremism.

Bishop Peter Zhuang Jianjian of Shantou (Guangdong) was

reportedly forced to go to Beijing, where a delegation from the Vatican asked him to leave his post to be replaced by Joseph Huang Bingzhang, a bishop not recognised by the Vatican. According to the Rome-based website AsiaNews, he received the same request last October.

The delegation then asked Bishop Joseph Guo Xijin of Mindong to accept a demotion to become the auxiliary or coadjutor of Bishop Vincent Zhan Silu, who is also not approved by the Vatican.

Hong Kong-based Cardinal Joseph Zen-Zekiun, 86, wrote in a blog post yesterday that the Vatican was at risk of “selling out the Catholic Church in China”. Pope Francis wants the Vatican to reach a deal with the state-backed Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association that oversees the registered Church.

Cardinal Zen was so troubled by the Vatican asking two of its own bishops to step aside that he flew to Rome to pass on a message from one of them, Bishop Zhuang, to Pope Francis and to convey what he later called “the worries of [Francis’] faithful children in China”. In an audience with the Pope, Francis told him: “I told them not to create another Mindszenty case!” (Cardinal Mindszenty was Archbishop of Budapest during Hungary’s communist dictatorship. The regime imprisoned him, but allowed him to flee the country; the Vatican replaced him with a candidate more to the government’s liking.)

From his experience of teaching in seminaries of the official

Catholic community in the 1990s, Zen said state-approved bishops there were subjected to “slavery and humiliation”. He likened the Chinese government today to a “totalitarian” regime.

State-approved clergy are less likely to criticise the communist government and are more likely to follow orders than so-called “underground” priests, despite Beijing’s sporadic crackdowns on clergy who question its authority and human-rights record.

Paul, a Catholic quoted by UCA News, criticised the Vatican’s approach. “We can neither bow nor compromise. If the Vatican does not live up to expectations, we have to fight for ourselves,” he said.

President Xi Jinping has said “religions in China must be Chinese in orientation” and independent from outside influence. The state-approved bishops and the Patriotic Association last December passed a five-year plan to “Sinicize” the Catholic Church.

AsiaNews commented: “Sinicizing the Chinese Church means supporting the principle of independence [from Rome] and follow the leadership of the Communist Party.”

Restrictions that come into force this week urge local officials to exert greater control over Christian and Muslim congregations and effectively outlaw “underground” church meetings, threatening church leaders and congregations with

large fines and confiscation of assets.

A local source told World Watch Monitor that the restrictions were one of several measures introduced to promote China's political ideology and increase control over its Christian population, which is fast growing.

"More and more analysts anticipate further tightening of security, control and increased religious restrictions under Xi's political influence, which might last until the year 2028 or later. Local churches that are closely connected with overseas groups – for example they're affiliated with overseas denominations or receiving overseas funds – or which have a large congregation size, meet in public areas, or openly advocate against government policies, would likely be the first to be targeted in a crackdown," the source said.

China is ranked the 43rd most difficult country in which to live as a Christian, according to the World Watch List published annually by the charity Open Doors. "If churches get too large or too political, they are seen as a threat and persecuted," the charity said, adding: "Communist authorities are increasing restrictions on Christians in order to control society and stay in power."

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UGANDA: Married women now undergoing circumcision

By David Mafabi

Faced with the new law against Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), traditionalists have now shifted to circumcising married women with the consent of their husbands.

Statistics released at the 2017 cultural day celebrations that focused on public health, reported that among more than 200 youth interviewed across Sebei sub-region (Kapchorwa, Kween and Bukwo districts), only 24 per cent of girls aged 10 to 14 have experienced some form of genital mutilation, while 76 per cent of women between 25 and 35 have undergone the procedure. Speaking to Daily Monitor last week, the Reproductive Education and Community Health programme executive director, Ms Beatrice Chelangat, said although the practice of circumcising young girls is slowly declining in Sebei, the trend has changed to circumcising married women.

“And this is being done in houses with the knowledge of husbands, in the villages and in the bushes even across the borders to Kenya. Wives claim that they are visiting relatives in Kenya but cross with local surgeons,” said Ms Chelangat.

The statistics reveal that uncircumcised married women are undergoing pressure from their husbands and society because they are not allowed to serve elders, get food from the granary and attend traditional meetings.

“The mothers-in-law abuse them, they are shunned,” said Ms Chelangat.

While reading from the 2017 FGM survey in Sebei sub-region, she said REACH found that in spite of the ban, traditionalists are carrying out the practice unabated in the bushes, in the hills and in caves with most incidents happening in secret, sometimes unhygienic places – creating a big risk of infection.

Former Kapchorwa District chairman Nelson Chelimo urged NGOs involved in the fight against FGM to now target married people.

FMG source

Globally, it is estimated that 100 million to 140 million girls and women alive have undergone some form of female genital mutilation, according to the United Nations Population Fund.

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LEBANON: A cup of tea served by child brides



Written by Veronica Lari, edited by Soizic Le Leslé Fauvelle – SB OverSeas

SB OverSeas (26.01.2018) – It was the beginning of this past

fall when Louma Albik went on her regular trip to Lebanon to visit SB OverSeas centres and assess the needs of the families, mostly Syrian, living in refugee camps. At SB OverSeas, the role of Chairwoman is not limited to managing the organisation from the Brussels headquarter. Frequent visits to Lebanon are a priority for SB OverSeas to facilitate coordination between the Brussels staff and the team on the ground. This enables the organisation to understand the real living conditions of refugee families and adapt programmes accordingly. SB OverSeas enjoys an authentic bond with the refugee community thanks to years of heart felt support and exchange. This gives the organisation an exclusive insight into the reality of its beneficiaries, allowing harsh personal stories and cultural dilemmas to emerge.

On a crisp sunny day of September, Louma arrived in the mountainous city of Aarsal, close to her native Syria. Located in North-Eastern Lebanon, between the Anti-Lebanon mountains, the town hosts tents as far as the eye can see for more than 60,000 refugees. The area is remote and arid, with no trees growing on its slopes. Political tensions are high, with frequent outbreaks between government forces and ISIL fighters. When combat broke out in the summer, SB OverSeas closed its centre until the violence died down in September. The re-opening offered Louma the occasion to re-evaluate the security situation of the area in person and take into consideration the needs of the 320 children enrolled in SB OverSeas' Aarsal school.

As she arrived, one member of the community offered Louma to accompany her on a visit around the camp. Walking close to his own tent, he invited his guest to enter and have a cup of tea. Once inside, three young girls approached, offering Louma tea and fruits. They were aged 11, 12 and 13. The man proudly

explained Louma that the three young girls were sisters married to each of his three sons. The boys were aged between 15 and 17, already working in the construction sector, manufacturing bricks from the surrounding mountains' stones. Smiling, the man explained that marrying the girls to his sons ensured them a better future and protection. He would continue to send them to the SB OverSeas school, they would be happy. At the same time, he expected them to become good wives and mothers, which was already the case for the oldest.

In Louma's head, a flow of thoughts started turning and spinning around. The casual way in which he described his new enlarged family stunned Louma to silence. She did not know how to react to her host, who had behaved so kindly and was full of good intentions. She became aware of the difference in perspectives due to the dramatic situation in which the family lived, and she tried to understand the nature of his choice. Louma asked an educator how these six children were married so young. The answer came from poverty, from the solitude of the encompassing area and the lack of opportunities. The boys accepted to get married to find in their wives a new friend and a person to lighten up difficult days.

A feeling of confusion invaded Louma. Her own principles could not let her accept the justifications for those marriages, but understanding the daily struggles of the camp was equally out of reach. She left the camp few hours later, but the experience could not leave her heart. Since then, Louma has been working to address the issue of early marriage, trying to understand the causes and complexity of the phenomenon, and seeking ways to raise awareness and prevent such a [detrimental practice](#).

The rate of early marriage has increased drastically in response to the poverty and vulnerability of Syrian families in the face of the crisis. In every aspect of its activities, SB OverSeas is committed to protecting children and young women's rights by bridging the education gap caused by the war and by raising awareness on the impact of early marriage on Syrian refugees.

Learn more about SB OverSeas at: <http://sboverseas.org>

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U.S.: New HHS civil rights division to shield health

workers with moral or religious objections

By Juliet Eilperin and Ariana Eunjung Cha

The Washington Post (17.01.2018) – <http://wapo.st/2Dzg8kL> – The Trump administration will create a new conscience and religious freedom division within the Health and Human Services Department to ease the way for doctors, nurses and other medical professionals to opt out of providing services that violate their moral or religious beliefs.

Specific details are scheduled to be announced Thursday. But the new policy appears to be broad and aimed at protecting health-care workers who cite those reasons for refusing to take part in abortions, treat transgender patients or participate in other types of care.

Conservative groups praised the move Wednesday as upholding providers' right to religious liberty.

"We think the Trump administration should set an example in enforcing the multiple conscience laws that have been passed since the 1970s to prevent the government from punishing people who have objections to participating in abortions," said David Christensen, vice president of government affairs at the Family Research Council.

But a number of women's and LGBT rights and physician groups expressed worry that such a policy would further discriminate against vulnerable populations and worsen inequities within health care. Even before the official announcement, several groups vowed to challenge it.

"This will impose a broad religious refusal policy that will allow individuals and institutions to deny basic care for women and transgender people. We know from experience that denial of care compromises care," said Dana Singiser, vice president of government affairs for Planned Parenthood.

By empowering an enforcement authority, the action will reverse policies put in place under President Barack Obama, and resurrect and expand "conscience protections" introduced under President George W. Bush. The new division, which will be part of the HHS Office for Civil Rights, will not only accept complaints from health-care professionals but will be responsible for ensuring that hospitals, clinics and other institutions across the country are accommodating their beliefs.

The previous administration, Christensen said, had "significantly narrowed enforcement of the laws" in place to safeguard those who oppose abortion or hold other religious convictions.

The president signed an executive order last year instructing agencies to expand religious liberty under federal law, and HHS has been at the leading edge of implementing that directive. The department issued rules in October that

provided broad religious and moral exemptions to the Affordable Care Act's mandate that employers, including for-profit companies, provide no-cost contraception coverage.

"President Trump promised the American people that his administration would vigorously uphold the rights of conscience and religious freedom," HHS Acting Secretary Eric Hargan said in a release Wednesday night. "That promise is being kept today. The Founding Fathers knew that a nation that respects conscience rights is more diverse and more free, and OCR's new division will help make that vision a reality."

Critics, however, said that the move represented a major civil rights rollback.

"The administration appears set to go far, far beyond the reasonable accommodations that have long existed in our laws. This is the use of religion to hurt people because you disapprove of who they are," Harper Jean Tobin, the National Center for Transgender Equality's director of policy, said in a statement. "The vast majority of the medical community is against any form of license to discriminate. That the administration is rushing out such a momentous rule in secret, hiding behind a vague description and potentially circumventing normal procedures, just underscores how far they have been straying from established law in this area."

Sarah Warbelow, legal director for the Human Rights Campaign, said the policy seeks to "devalue the humanity of LGBTQ people."

“Every American deserves access to medically necessary health care, and that health care should not be determined by the personal opinions of individual health care providers or administrative staff,” she said.

“Conscience” protections have been around for decades, whether in state statutes or as part of hospital policies, but some health-care providers have said those have not been enough to protect them.

In 2009, Cathy Cenzone-DeCarlo, a nurse at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York, was forced to assist in a second-term abortion or face disciplinary action. She sued, but a court rejected her claim that Mount Sinai had violated federal protections because it received nearly \$375 million in research funding from the National Institutes of Health. DeCarlo’s complaint with the HHS Office of Civil Rights was not addressed until 2013, when the hospital changed its policies and procedures so employees were no longer forced to participate in abortions over their objections.

“We look forward to seeing protections for pro-life nurses like Cathy DeCarlo . . . and other health care professionals from being forced to participate in the destruction of innocent lives,” Mallory Quigley, communications director for the antiabortion Susan B. Anthony List, said in an email.

Yet Ben Brown, a gynecologist-obstetrician in Chicago and a fellow with Physicians for Reproductive Health, said the administration’s new rule appears to go against the oaths that health-care providers take when they enter their professions,

ethics policies at many hospitals and state statutes in many parts of the country that require basic care be delivered to those who need it.

“Imposing their values on a patient is not in consort with our professional job as doctors,” he said.

Louise Melling, deputy legal director for the American Civil Liberties Union, said Wednesday that federal employment law allows workplaces to accommodate individuals’ beliefs as long as they do not impose an undue hardship.

“Religious liberty gives you a right to your beliefs, but it doesn’t give you the right to impose your beliefs on others or harm others, including to discriminate against others,” Melling said.

[Website: HHS.gov, Department of Conscience and Religious Freedom](http://www.hhs.gov/department-of-conscience-and-religious-freedom/)

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