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Churches involved in torture, murder of thousands of African children denounced as witches

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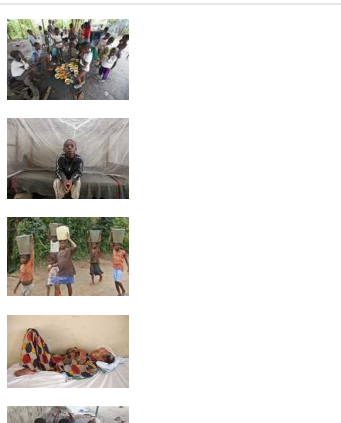


This Aug. 18, 2009 photo shows children accused of witchcraft waiting for food at the Children's Rights and Rehabilitation Network in Eket, Nigeria. The idea of witchcraft is hardly new, but it has taken on new life recently partly because of a rapid growth in evangelical Christianity. Campaigners against the practice say around 15,000 children have been accused in two of Nigeria's 36 states over the past decade and around 1,000 have been murdered. (AP Photo/Sunday Alam ba) (SUNDAY ALAMBA, AP / August 18)



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Associated Press Writer
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EKET, Nigeria (AP) — The nine-year-old boy lay on a bloodstained hospital sheet crawling with ants, staring blindly at the wall.

His family pastor had accused him of being a witch, and his father then tried to force acid down his throat as an exorcism. It spilled as he struggled, burning away his face and eyes. The emaciated boy barely had strength left to whisper the name of the church that had denounced him — Mount Zion





Lighthouse.

A month later, he died.

Nwanaokwo Edet was one of an increasing number of children in Africa accused of witchcraft by pastors and then tortured or killed, often by family members. Pastors were involved in half of 200 cases of "witch children" reviewed by the AP, and 13 churches were named in the case files.

Some of the churches involved are renegade local branches of international franchises. Their parishioners take literally the Biblical exhortation, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live."

"It is an outrage what they are allowing to take place in the name of Christianity," said Gary Foxcroft, head of nonprofit Stepping Stones Nigeria.

For their part, the families are often extremely poor, and sometimes even relieved to have one less mouth to feed. Poverty, conflict and poor education lay the foundation for accusations, which are then triggered by the death of a relative, the loss of a job or the denunciation of a pastor on the make, said Martin Dawes, a spokesman for the United Nations Children's Fund.

"When communities come under pressure, they look for scapegoats," he said. "It plays into traditional beliefs that someone is responsible for a negative change ... and children

are defenseless."

The idea of witchcraft is hardly new, but it has taken on new life recently partly because of a rapid growth in evangelical Christianity. Campaigners against the practice say around 15,000 children have been accused in two of Nigeria's 36 states over the past decade and around 1,000 have been murdered. In the past month alone, three Nigerian children accused of witchcraft were killed and another three were set on fire.

Nigeria is one of the heartlands of abuse, but hardly the only one: the United Nations Children's Fund says tens of thousands of children have been targeted throughout Africa.

Church signs sprout around every twist of the road snaking through the jungle between Uyo, the capital of the southern Akwa Ibom state where Nwanaokwo lay, and Eket, home to many more rejected "witch children." Churches outnumber schools, clinics and banks put together. Many promise to solve parishioner's material worries as well as spiritual ones — eight out of ten Nigerians struggle by on less than \$2 a day.

"Poverty must catch fire," insists the Born 2 Rule Crusade on one of Uyo's main streets.

"Where little shots become big shots in a short time," promises the Winner's Chapel down the road.

"Pray your way to riches," advises Embassy of Christ a few blocks away.

It's hard for churches to carve out a congregation with so much competition. So some pastors establish their credentials by accusing children of witchcraft.

Nwanaokwo said he knew the pastor who accused him only as Pastor King. Mount Zion Lighthouse in Nigeria at first confirmed that a Pastor King worked for them, then denied that they knew any such person.

Bishop A.D. Ayakndue, the head of the church in Nigeria, said pastors were encouraged to pray about witchcraft, but not to abuse children.

"We pray over that problem (of witchcraft) very powerfully," he said. "But we can never hurt a child."



