

KARAMOJA CHILD TRAFFICKING RINGS

are educated and influential in society do not become part of the process.

He said Napak local government authorities need to draft harsh regulations against trafficking children.

"The same approach that the Government used to construct infrastructure and disarm the Karimojong rustlers should be used to fight child trafficking," Mukisa said.

SCHOOL SPEAKS OUT

When I visited Lodooi Primary School in Napak's Matany sub-county, there were 148 children (102 girls and 46 boys aged between 1-15 years), who had been picked from the streets of Kampala.

Once the children arrived at the school, they were medically examined, and fortunately, there are no cases of HIV among this lot; all the infections found were treatable.

During my visit to the school, I discovered that some of the children were trying to scale the fence to run away, but they are constantly monitored.

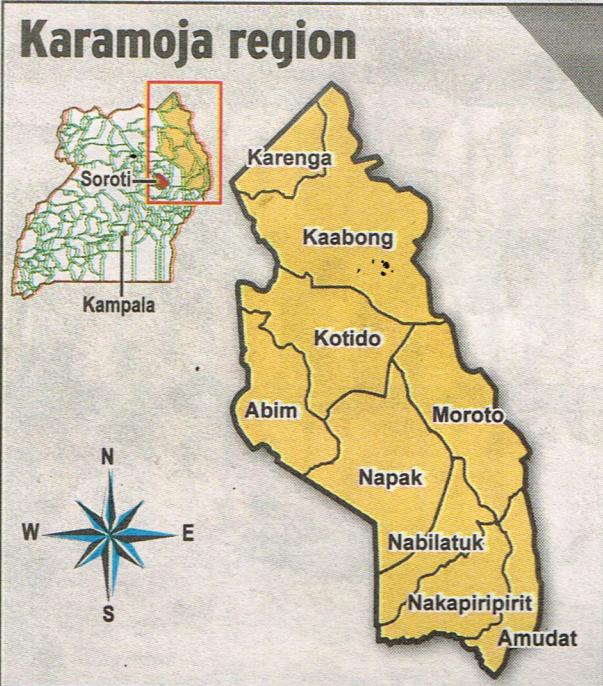
Sophia Onziru, the senior woman at the school, revealed that many children do not even know their villages of origin, and neither do they recall who their parents are. Since some of them were trafficked to Kampala when they were only a few months old, they cannot speak the Ngakarimojong language – they speak fluent Luganda, the dominant language in Kampala.

On visiting days, while other children are visited by their parents, children from the streets are rarely visited. They used to cry at first, but they are getting used to it," Onziru said.

For fear of these children escaping back to Kampala, they are kept at school even during holidays. They are only allowed to go home for holidays after three years, revealed Onziru.

"We keep them here or in a house at Moroto Diocese from where they are rehabilitated," she said.

Onziru said when they came in, the children were like grasshoppers on the fence because they were not used to school life. Those who managed to escape were tracked with the help of the army and Police up to Pallisa



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and Kumi, and were returned.

"When girls are planning to escape, they give all sorts of excuses like food is bad. This is how we devised a tactic of locking them in the dormitory at night and opening for them in the morning throughout the entire holiday," she said.

The school is guarded by a soldier deployed from the Uganda People's Defence Forces 3rd Division to protect the children. During holidays, the children go through counselling sessions.

Onziru said teachers allocate the children classes after assessing their individual competences. The children still behave like they are on the streets of Kampala.

"They eat leftovers in the trash bins and also collect and eat leaves," Onziru said.

It is clear that they need love, tolerance, counselling and care.

Some of the children have mental health challenges that need special psychiatric attention. The medical attention that is accorded to them is not regular – there is no resident medic at the school. The civil society organisations send medics to the school occasionally – like once a month – and when a child requires immediate medical attention, they rush them to Matany Hospital. Matany is a missionary Catholic Church-founded hospital.

I also visited Nakichelet Primary School, where 126 children were taken after an operation on the streets of Kampala. Three infants from this group were taken to a baby's home in Soroti after their mothers disappeared.

Lucy Lemukol, a social worker in Lokopo sub-county, said the majority of the children were female. She said most of them had been turned into street beggars and sex workers.

"It is not easy to get information from them. They have forgotten their culture and language, some don't even recall their homes and biological parents," Lemukol said.

She is afraid that those who do not have parents and

LOCAL LEADER SPEAKS OUT

Eliah Lowoto, the chairperson of Matany trading centre, said most of the children have since become battle-hardened and lost any semblance of respect for their parents.

"Once they get phones, they start to co-ordinate with their friends and plan on how to move. Parents are seen as a distraction," he said.

Lowoto said some of the factors pushing children to Kampala include hunger and poverty.

"Some of the children do not like school, even those who are given scholastic materials escape," he added. When trafficked children get problems in Kampala, Lowoto said that is when their parents go to him seeking help.

"But I also send them to the Police, though they always fear to go there because many of them willingly surrender their children," he said.

Lowoto said traffickers collect children from villages in Karamoja after deceiving their parents that they have good jobs for them in Kampala, and that they use Matany town as one of the collection centres.

"Matany is the only town with transport means because no bus or taxi goes to villages to pick them," Lowoto said.

He revealed that some of the civil society organisations were using children in Karamoja for their selfish interests.

"There are several organisations here in Napak that are useless. All they do is organise people in a tent, buy them soda and chapati, take their pictures and leave. I suspect they use those pictures to seek donor funding, yet they are not helping the children to stay in school," he said.

homes will become more traumatised.

"There is a house at Moroto Diocese where they can go until school resumes, but it is hard to maintain them.

"Two years ago, we were receiving a few children, but since last year, the number has been increasing," Lemukol said.

MATANY HOSPITAL CHECKS

Children who are recovered from the streets of Kampala are taken to Matany Hospital for check-up, including HIV tests.

According to nurse Fausta Kokoi, Matany receives isolated cases of HIV among teenage mothers.

She revealed that some teenagers are rape victims and report with police letters for examination and are put on PEP (Post-Exposure Prophylaxis).

They are also tested for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and pregnancy, and if they

are found pregnant, they start antenatal care.

"We receive teenage mothers aged between 14 and 19. Some do not know antenatal care exists, but when they come, we give them services," Kokoi said.

She said HIV infections are rare, but STIs are common.

Kokoi said most of the teenage mothers deliver by caesarean section because they are not mature enough to have a normal delivery.

"Their pelvic bones are not well-developed, so they mostly deliver by C-section," she said, adding that they counsel teenage mothers and teach them about family planning methods to enable them avoid unwanted pregnancies.

Patients come from as far as Amudat, Abim, Kotido and within Napak itself to seek medical care at Matany Hospital.

John Ojang, the in-charge of the child and family protection

unit at Napak Police Station, revealed that 18 suspects were arrested and taken to court on charges of aggravated child trafficking.

CONFIRMATION OF SUSPECTS

"Three of the suspects were men, while the other 15 were women," Ojang said.

So far, he said, one of the suspects has been found guilty and sentenced to seven years in prison.

When children are intercepted while being trafficked, Ojang said some parents follow up, while others do not show up for fear of being arrested for colluding with the traffickers.

"We detain parents of intercepted children over negligence and, after three days, we release them because they have other children to take care of at home," he said.

Juveniles who commit crimes are taken to Kampiringisa Rehabilitation Centre in Mpigi district to serve sentences, Ojang added.

At times, giving out a child is decided upon by elders, who argue that it is the responsibility of the Government to educate them.

"I always get intelligence about child trafficking and we have intercepted many children. We don't give them back to their parents; we take them to school, and this has helped in curbing the vice.

"Some of the civil society organisations have also helped us provide materials such as mattresses, blankets, food, pads and scholastic materials to the children in school," Ojang said.

The biggest challenge, he said, is poor co-ordination and lack of airtime.

"We also need funding to keep the children in school so that we can give them hope and a better life. Some of the children don't remember their homes and parents. When you ask them, they tell you their home is in Kampala. These are children who were taken when they were very young and can't remember anything," Ojang said, corroborating what authorities at Lodooi Primary School said.

In Napak, the leading sub-county in child trafficking is Lopeei, followed by Lokopo and Matany.

TOMORROW IN NEW VISION: THE PRIME SUSPECTS IN CHILD TRAFFICKING