Toll of killings by Ugandan cult exceeds 400

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Latest estimates of the number who died in the church fire at Kanungu, southwest Uganda total over 400. Indications are that the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God church members used explosives to set fire to the building on March 17, in what appears to have been a mass suicide.

President Yoweri Museveni announced a commission of inquiry into the deaths. The police, criticised for burying the bodies in a mass grave before adequate forensic tests could be carried out, are now treating the deaths as murder. Relatives of the dead claim that at least some of the victims had been held against their will.

Investigators have found the bodies of at least 78 children among the charred remains, though the fire was so intense that the exact number killed cannot be determined. The building's windows had been nailed up from the outside and a single eyewitness reports seeing people inside dying in agony.

The bodies of six male adults were found in a pit latrine near to the church, apparently murdered not long before the fire. Other bodies, seemingly dead from natural causes, were discovered buried in the vegetable garden in the church compound.

In the days since the fire excavations have begun at other sites belonging to the sect at Buhunga, 50 kilometres from Kanungu. More than 153 bodies have been exhumed from three sites, according to BBC reports. Many had been strangled or hacked to death, probably at least a month ago.

Cult members are said to have been preparing to die for some time. The sect, which was founded in the late 1980s, preached that the world would end in 2000 and that a new generation would live on an earth where "sorrow and misery are absent".

Church followers were bussed in from other parts of Uganda in the days before the mass deaths, and relatives report that members were selling off their property at low prices, telling them that the Holy Spirit was coming to take them to heaven. They were told that March 17, 2000 would mark the end of the world, and to prepare for that date. The sect held a party a few days prior to the mass killing, roasting an ox and drinking soft drinks.

Whilst one of the heads of the group, a defrocked Roman Catholic priest, is known to have died in the fire, its main leaders, 68-year-old Joseph Kibwetere and so-called prophetess Credonia Mwerinda, were seen by an eyewitness fleeing the church early in the morning before the fire.

Kibwetere was once a wealthy farmer and a leading member of the Roman Catholic-based Democratic Party in the 1960s and '70s. He had to flee his home under the persecution of the Obote regime in 1980. He resurfaced in the late 1980s as the leader of the cult founded by 40-year-old Mwerinda, a former prostitute.

Kibwetere claimed he had overheard a conversation between Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary, which he recorded on tape. A lady's voice on the tape says that the Ten Commandments must be enforced or the world will end. Kibwetere set up his sect in opposition to the Catholic Church, which he maintained was not strict enough. Members were expected to sell all their possessions and donate the proceeds to the church, which ran a thriving farm for its community of followers and, as a registered charity, raised money throughout the world.

The horrific events in southwest Uganda give expression to a profound social, political and ideological malaise. The post-war history of Uganda, like that of many African nations, witnessed repeated efforts by the masses to overcome the legacy of colonial oppression. Britain granted independence in 1962, but this left Uganda with an underdeveloped economy and wracked by tribalist and religious divisions.

In 1962, Milton Obote's Ugandan People's Congress (UPC)—a shaky alliance of regional and tribalist groupings—came to power. They did so in an alliance with the elite of Buganda, one of the kingdoms that had made up the colony of Uganda.

Under colonial rule, the leaders of Buganda enjoyed a relatively privileged status. After independence there was continual conflict over the spoils of office between the UPC and the Bugandans, as well as within the UPC itself. Obote used the army to crush the Bugandan royal establishment in 1966, and then increasingly dealt with internal UPC opposition by relying on the police and army.

The policies of national development pursued during the 1960s raised widespread expectations that poverty would be overcome, and health care and education would be provided. There were some limited social gains, but on the basis of bourgeois rule there was no possibility of breaking out of the West's economic domination of the country. Obote had nationalised indigenous industry, but Uganda was still heavily dependent on coffee and cotton exports, which had fallen in value. The result was growing inequality of incomes, with a majority of the rural masses pushed further into poverty.

Even the limited social gains that had been made came under attack. In 1971 Obote's military chief, General Idi Amin, seized power in a coup. Amin initially enjoyed the support of the British government for his opposition to Obote's "left-wing turn". His regime degenerated into one of mass terror, resulting in the deaths of up to half a million people before the Tanzanian army removed it in 1979. As well as expelling the Asian community, Amin whipped up tribalist and religious divisions to a fever pitch. Uganda's economy virtually collapsed.

At the end of 1980 Obote returned to power in rigged elections. He was opposed by a number of armed groups, including the National Resistance Movement (NRM) led by Museveni. The NRM championed Pan-Africanism and claimed to be Marxist. Its promise to implement socialist policies won considerable popular support and, in the face of brutal repression, it waged a protracted guerrilla war against both Amin and Obote. It is estimated that up to 500,000 more were killed between 1981 and 1985.

The NRM was only one amongst many Pan-Africanist movements throughout the continent that promised economic development and improved social conditions and which won mass support. Museveni had studied at Dar-es-Salam University, which under the presidency of Julius Nyerere became the centre of Pan-Africanism after Kwame Nkrumah was overthrown in Ghana in 1966. Museveni also visited the Frelimo resistance movement in Mozambique, then fighting against Portuguese colonial rule.

When he came to power in 1986, however, Museveni, like many of his contemporaries, abandoned his earlier radicalism. He turned to the IMF and World Bank for support and embraced their free market doctrines. In return for Western aid, most of the state-run industry was privatised and Uganda's markets opened up to international investors.

Growth rates went up to 7 percent a year in the 1990s, but this did not benefit the mass of the urban and rural poor. Almost half (46 percent) the population still consume less than the minimum daily calorie level set by the World Health Organisation as a measure of absolute poverty. Some 5.3 percent of children under four suffer malnutrition and a further 38.3 percent are stunted. For every 1,000 babies born, 97 die at birth and another 147 die before the age of five.

Official statistics show that 44 percent of the population were unable to afford health care the last time they were ill. About one in eleven people between the ages of 15 and 49 have HIV or AIDs. The AIDs epidemic in Uganda has led to 1.7 million children being orphaned, the largest number in the world.

The country's economy is crippled by debt repayments greater than the total amount spent on health and education. World market prices for coffee have continued to fall, making Uganda's debt unsustainable. There has also been an escalation of military conflict in the recent period, both internally and with the neighbouring Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God cult it is part of a growing trend throughout East Africa. In Uganda, police closed down two such cults last year. One of them, the World Message Last Warning Church in central Uganda, had about 1,000 members living in a compound, of which a third were children. It was closed following reports that its members were involved in rape and kidnap. One of the several armed groups fighting against the Ugandan government is the Lord's Resistance Army, led by the mystic Joseph Kony and financially backed by Sudan. It is notorious for its brutality.

Over the border in Rwanda, according to one report, the number of Christian "end-of-the-world" sects has increased from 8 to 300 in the years since the genocidal massacres of 1994.

Apart from the more tangible causes—AIDs, poverty and civil war—what has precipitated the turn to religious hysteria is the impact of ideological and political changes of the last two decades. This process is embodied in the evolution of a leading Pan-Africanist intellectual like Museveni from anti-imperialist rebel to IMF minion and proponent of free-market economics.

Pan-Africanism held out the hope that the post-independence states of Africa could offer their people some level of development that would improve social conditions, compared with what they had experienced under colonialism. Whilst Museveni and many others dressed up this nationalist programme as “socialism”, it was really a movement that represented the interests of an aspiring middle class layer which, without access to capital, saw the state as a means of economic advancement.

Museveni's evolution from a student radical and guerrilla fighter to confidante of bankers and western politicians is consistent with his Pan-Africanist perspective. So long as the Cold War offered room for manoeuvre between East and West, it was advantageous for Pan Africanists to present themselves as socialists. With the collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, the only aid they can hope to get is from the United States and West; so their Marxist pretensions have been dropped, revealing the basic class interests of a narrow elite.

For the mass of the population who believed their promises of social improvement, this transformation from national liberation fighters to business entrepreneurs has proved profoundly disorienting. The failure of the national liberation movements—for which several generations of Africans fought—has created a mood of despair amongst sections of the impoverished and oppressed on the continent. Such moods are exploited by religious sects like that headed by Kibwetere.