

Tension as Ggaba child murder

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BY JULIET KIGONGO

The wail of sirens pierced the late afternoon calm in Makindye, a city suburb, on Tuesday as a heavily guarded police convoy snaked its way to the Chief Magistrate's Court, carrying the man at the centre of one of Kampala's most horrifying child murder cases in recent memory.

Shortly after 4 pm, armed police and military personnel jumped out of the lead vehicles and swiftly cordoned off the court premises.

Within moments, Christopher Okello Onyum, the prime suspect in the killing of four toddlers at Ggaba Early Childhood Development Programme, was hurried out of a navy-blue police van and rushed into court under tight security.

The suspect, 38, appeared visibly frail and unsteady on his feet as a soldier gripped him tightly by the belt and guided him into the courtroom. His hands were cuffed and he wore an expressionless face.

Inside the court, the room fell into a tense silence as Okello took his seat in



Christopher Okello Onyum, at the Chief Magistrate's court, Makindye, yesterday. He was charged with murder of four children at Ggaba Early Childhood Development Centre. PHOTOS / ABUBAKER LUBOWA

the centre of the courtroom, with his legs shackled too as he was guarded by heavily armed security personnel.

Dressed in faded blue jeans, a black T-shirt, and a jacket, he blinked repeatedly and pursed his lips frequently while waiting for proceedings to begin. At exactly 4:44 pm, the court session opened.

Chief State Attorneys Jonathan Muwaganya and Anna Kiiza led the prosecution as four counts of murder were formally read out to the accused.

According to the charge sheet, Okello is accused of unlawfully causing the death of Gideon Eteku, Keisha Agenorworth Otim, Ignitius Sseruyange, and Ryan Odeke on April 2 at the Ggaba Early Childhood Development Programme with malice aforethought.

When Senior Grade One Magistrate Aidah Nanjala asked which language he understood, the suspect responded calmly: "English only, I am very comfortable with it."

The magistrate then directed him to listen as the charges were read.

But in a brief exchange, Ms Nanjala reminded the accused that her court lacks jurisdiction to try capital offences such as murder.

It is against this backdrop that Okello could not plead to the four counts of murder, which, upon conviction, carry up to the maximum penalty of death by hanging.

"You need not say anything in this court because I have no jurisdiction to handle this matter. State, how far with the investigations?"

Mr Muwaganya told the court that investigations were nearly complete and

suspect faces court

ABOUT THE CASE

Charge Sheet

In a brief exchange, Senior Grade One Magistrate Aidah Nanjala reminded the accused, Mr Christopher Okello Onyum that her court lacks jurisdiction to try capital offences such as murder. It is against this backdrop that Okello could not plead to the four counts of murder, which, upon conviction, carry up to the maximum penalty of death by hanging.

Events of April 2

Witnesses say the suspect posed as an ordinary parent seeking admission for a child. He had reportedly visited the daycare days earlier, asking about the process and raising no suspicion. On the day of the attack, he allegedly returned, paid Shs180,000 in admission fees, and briefly spoke to the administrator.

sought a short adjournment.

In response, the magistrate informed Okello of his rights, including the right to a state-funded lawyer and the right to apply for bail before the High Court.

"For the meantime, the accused person is remanded to Luzira Prison until April 8 (today)," she ruled briefly.

The tension that had built inside the courtroom quickly spilled beyond its walls.

As prison warders moved to escort the suspect back to the holding cells, angry voices erupted from other suspects already in the court holding cells.

"Bring him here, and we'll show him!" some shouted. Others recoiled at the thought of sharing space with him.

"Don't mix him with us!" came another voice from the cells.

The outburst forced prison officials to swiftly alter their plan, redirecting Okello away from the holding area and straight into a waiting prison bus under tight guard.

The dramatic court appearance came barely a day after Principal Judge Jane Frances Abodo disclosed that President Museveni had directed the Judiciary to fast-track the case and, where possible, conduct the proceedings within the Ggaba community itself.

Speaking during the funeral service of retired Supreme Court Justice Augustine Nshimye at All Saints Cathedral on Monday, Justice Abodo said the President had urged the Judiciary to test its mobile court system on the matter.

"Take the court to where the incident happened and handle the case there. And handle it fast," she said, relaying the President's directive.

The Judiciary now plans to use its recently operationalised mobile court system to expedite the case, given that Ggaba does not host a High Court station capable of trying murder offences.

The killings, which occurred on April 2, left the Ggaba community, and the country, in shock and mourning. Most

clerics in their Easter messages strongly condemned the gruesome murder of innocent children.

Witnesses say the suspect posed as an ordinary parent seeking admission for a child. He had reportedly visited the daycare days earlier, asking about the process and raising no suspicion.

On the day of the attack, he allegedly returned, paid Shs180,000 in admission fees, and briefly spoke to the administrator.

Then, according to witnesses, he stepped outside where several toddlers aged between one and three years were playing. For a few moments, he appeared to join in their games. Then, without warning, the scene turned into horror.

"It happened so fast. The children were just playing happily, then he attacked them," one witness recalled.

Residents quickly gave chase as the suspect reportedly attempted to flee.

The crowd, enraged by the killings, nearly lynched him before police intervened, firing warning shots into the air and rushing him to Kabalagala Police Station.

Murder being a capital offence, Okello will, going forward, appear before the Magistrates Court for purposes of mentioning his case until such a time when the police conclude carrying out investigations, that is, when he will be committed to the High Court to stand trial.

For many parents in Ggaba, the wounds remain raw, and Tuesday's court appearance offered only the first glimpse of what promises to be a closely watched quest for justice.

Clarification

The headline of a story, about Sukuk bonds, which we published on page 23 of our BD Life magazine on Tuesday, April 7, was wrongly worded. Sukuk bonds are not associated with gambling, an act that is prohibited under Sharia law. Sukuk is a Sharia-compliant financial instrument structured to eliminate speculation, gambling, and interest. We apologise for the inconvenience caused.

- Editor

Monitor Publications endeavours to get everything it publishes correct. When mistakes are made, we want to know, and a correction will be published as soon as possible. Please notify us of any needed correction at corrections@ug.nationmedia.com, or by writing to the Editor, Plot 29-36, 8th Street Industrial Area, Namuwongo, P.O. Box 12141, Kampala-Uganda, or by calling the News Editor at 0312301100. Thank you.

Pros and cons of mobile courts/community trials

BY ELIZABETH KAMURUNGI

On April 4, President Museveni directed the Judiciary to conduct the trial of the suspect in the killing of four toddlers at a Ggaba Early Childhood Development Programme, in the community where the crime was committed, so that residents can witness justice being dispensed.

The killing of the children on April 2 elicited intense grief and anger, with residents baying for the blood of the suspect, Christopher Okello Onyum.

If President Museveni's directive is implemented, the case will be handled through a mobile court.

A mobile court conducts proceedings in a location or facility other than court premises, for a specified period of time. The framework, while not new, was only formalised by Chief Justice Flavien Zeja last month through the Constitution (Operation of Mobile Courts) (Practice) Directions, 2026.

"Court is really not a building per se. It is the setup that comprises of a judicial officer, the lawyers, the DPP, the police, the witnesses, and whoever must be in attendance. It can be set up anywhere as long as it is safe, secure, and people can easily access it," Mr Anthony Asimwe, the vice president of the Uganda Law Society, said.

Under the directions, only the Judiciary can determine when a mobile court or community trial is conducted. A mobile court is presided over by a judge or magistrate assigned by the Chief Justice, and can handle both civil and criminal matters.

In the case of the Ggaba killings, the capital offence must be handled by a High Court, and it fits within the terms of procedure of a mobile court. Ms Jacquelyne Okui, the Spokesperson of the Directorate of Public Prosecutions (DPP), yesterday said the Directorate will handle the case as directed by the Judiciary, be it in the established courts or otherwise.

"He only appeared today [Tuesday] in the magistrate's court for the charges to be read out and explained to him. When investigations are complete and we have all the evidence, he will be committed to the High Court for trial. It is most likely that the trial will be held by the mobile court. It is not for us to determine. That's a Judiciary matter," she said.

Mobile courts, according to paragraph five of the Directions, are aimed at improving access to justice by taking judicial services to every part of Uganda, even to refugee camps and refugee host communities, and strengthening the existing processes of administra-

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tion of justice to facilitate speedy delivery of justice.

While Ggaba suburb is in proximity to multiple established courts, President Museveni argued that a community trial would be ideal for the residents to witness justice being dispensed. In the early days of the NRM, community trials were common for army personnel who committed crimes against civilians as a means to institute discipline in the forces and create confidence in the citizens. In recent years, prominent community trials include the trial of Thomas Kwoyelo, a former commander in the Lord's Resistance Army, who was tried and sentenced by the International Crimes Division of the High Court sitting in Gulu.

In the Kwoyelo Trial, Human Rights Watch highlighted several pros and cons of community trials, with benefits like increasing visibility and resonance with the communities that were most affected by the crimes. The organisation, however, warned that locating the

trial in the community would increase security risks for judges, division staff, and the accused, along with heightening challenges to protect witnesses.

Mr Asimwe of ULS says the advantages of mobile courts and community trials far outweigh the negatives.

"It will reduce the cost of people moving miles to look for courts and judicial officers. It also gives a chance to some witnesses who are hard to transport. Therefore, it would reduce the backlog, and solve so many challenges, especially the cost involved in accessing justice."

Mr Asimwe, however, says there are loopholes to be addressed and calls for clear procedures.

"The challenge is that they are not giving it a holistic approach. Areas, like islands and other hard-to-reach areas, have a challenge of most people appearing in those courts not being legally represented." He tasked the government to fast-track the National Legal Aid Bill to cure this loophole.

Constitutional lawyer, Wandera Ogallo says that while mobile courts come with multiple advantages, they should be used according to established procedure, and not at the directive of the President.

"I think it is very dangerous for the President to be seen as directing how a person should be tried. That really undermines the independence of the Judiciary. We should leave the judicial officers to make their decisions. That's how somebody comes up to think that yes, we really have an independent Judiciary. If it comes up with the same conclusion as his, so be it," he said.