

Islanders look for solutions to drowning

Target. The organisation aims at training 500 people to train others with skills to prevent drowning, especially among fishing communities.

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MASAKA. On the fateful day of August 15, three fishermen in Bujumba Sub-county, Kalangala District, got into their boat to retrieve their nets after a fishing expedition. Unfortunately, strong waves struck the boat, breaking it, and as a result, the trio drowned.

These are some of the cases of drowning that happen on Uganda's water bodies among fishing communities that have little or no knowledge about swimming skills.

This has prompted a group of local volunteers under their NGO, Swim Safe Uganda, to start a one-year life-saving campaign to reduce the cases of drowning on Ugandan water bodies, especially on Lake Victoria and Lake Albert.

Mr Moses Kalanzi, the NGO's programmes director, says they will equip communities that mainly use water transport with practical swimming skills.

"Most of the people who travel on water are so vulnerable to drowning and majority of them have helplessly died due to failure to get to the shores or keep floating on the waters until they are helped," Mr Kalanzi said during an interview last week.

Although there are no official statistics on the number of people who drown annually, the World Health Organisation (WHO) ranks Uganda among the top six countries with the highest number of deaths resulting due to drowning.

According to WHO, out of every 100,000 deaths that occur in Uganda, 12.7 per cent are as a result of drowning.

Recently, Uganda hosted Africa Water Safety Week, an initiative aimed at sharing water safety education and drowning prevention in Africa, which Mr Kalanzi used to establish partnership with international swimming trainers, to voluntarily train communities.

"Our target is to train at least 500 people from which we will select trainers of trainers who will be our ambassadors in different parts of the country," he says, adding: "Even after the end of the water safety week, we will continue to roll out our campaign in all districts."

Shs70,000

Price. Amount of money a life jacket costs on the Ugandan market.

Mr Bill Nkeeto, the general secretary of Swim Safe Uganda, says they have chosen to start with communities in Kalangala Islands because they are prone to drowning.

Another incident of drowning recorded in Kalangala occurred on June 4 when six people from the same family died after a boat they were travelling in from Kasekulo



Risky. Fishermen on a fishing expedition at Kachanga Landing Site in Masaka District recently. PHOTO BY HENRY LUBIALWA

Landing Site in Mugoye Sub-county capsized.

Mr Nkeeto says their goal is to equip many residents with the life-saving skills so that they train others.

"We are going to screen all passenger boats to ascertain whether they possess sea worthy certificates. The time is now to acquire such certificates because boats without such certificates will not be allowed to transport passengers," WILLY LUGOLOOBI, KALANGALA DISTRICT CHAIRPERSON

"We have selected people from a diversity of groups in the islands, and we are going to add some value to them. Despite its magnitude, government has not given drowning the deserving attention like it does to other killers or life threats," he said.

Mr Nkeeto is, however, optimistic that their intervention will attract government interest in finding remedy to the problem.

He says they have so far secured 50 life-saving kits to aid in the training, urging government to support the initiative.

Mr Denny McArthur, one of the American swimming trainers, urged government to subsidise prices on the water life jackets to make them more affordable. On average, a life jacket costs Shs70,000 on the local market.

Recently, Kalangala District Council passed a resolution compelling passenger boats moving from one destination to another to ensure that their occupants are wearing life jackets.

The authorities also resolved that passenger boats which lack sea/water worthy certificates will not be allowed to ply various routes within the district.

The move, according to the district

chairperson, Mr Willy Lugolobi, is aimed at reducing water accidents on Lake Victoria.

A sea worthy certificate is one of the minimum requirements provided by the Ministry of Transport for any passenger or cargo boat plying a given route.

Apart from larger marine vessels such as MV Kalangala, MV Sseke and MV Pearl, only two other boats; one owned by Sseke Island Nature Conservation and Tourism Association and another by Kalangala Forum for People Living with HIV/Aids Network, have certificates that allow them transport both passengers and cargo.

Other passenger boats that sail to the different destinations in the outlying islands are not licensed, according to Mr Lugolobi.

Mr Lugolobi says authorities will also ensure that all boats are under the command of people with valid certificates of competence (skipper's certificates).

"All passenger boats will be surveyed annually and a certificate of fitness will then be issued after the inspection," he added.

The district's intervention came after an overloaded boat capsized in Lake Victoria after it was hit by strong winds and 12 people drowned.

The victims were travelling from Bukasa in Kalangala District to Entebbe mainland for Christmas festivals. Only four people who had life jackets survived and six bodies are still missing to date.

Several fatal accidents have also been registered on Lake Albert and the most recent dreadful one occurred last December when 30 people drowned when the boat they were travelling in capsized on Christmas Day.

The victims, who were from Kweibanda village in Buliisa District were travelling to Runga Landing Site in Hoima District for a friendly football match, as part of



Rescue. Police marines rescue boat passengers trapped in Lake Victoria on Tuesday in Kalangala District in 2014. FILE PHOTO

the Christmas Day festivities.

The marine police confirmed then that the boat was overloaded and majority of the passengers had no lifejackets.

Some people, especially fishermen drown as they attempt to escape from pirates who usually attack them to steal their boat engines and other valuables.

Such cases are rampant on small islands and landing sites on Lake Victoria which are located near Uganda-Tanzanian border.

CASES ON LAKE VICTORIA

Statistics from Lake Victoria Basin Commission estimate that 5,000 people perish below its waters every year. When the weather is bad, from roughly June to August, Uganda's marine police get reports of drowning at least once a week. Last October, the African Development Bank approved a \$25 million loan for

the three countries bordering Lake Victoria (Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania). The money will provide regular weather reports and alerts to people on the lake (via text message and radio broadcasts), expand cellphone coverage and build a network of 22 rescue centres along the shore.

Most boats on Ugandan lakes are obsolete, unlicensed or uninsured and the landing sites are in deplorable state.

This unregulated water transport has resulted in many fatal boat accidents due to unchecked overloading, sailing on undesignated routes and use of defective boats and canoes.

Source: Internet