

BY ANDREW BAGALA

KAMPALA. Mr Simon Okurut was in untold pain as he stood more than 50 yards away, watching helplessly as his son lay motionless for hours on the veranda of Ggaba Early Childhood Development Programme.

It was well past midday, and the April sun blazed over the school premises on the outskirts of the capital Kampala.

Dozens of police officers stood guard to block the public from accessing the school that had now turned into a scene of crime after the incident that reportedly happened between 11am and midday.

Some bent over to take photographs of the lifeless body while others stretched tape lines across the ground, measuring distances as though grief could be calculated.

Inspector General of Police Abas Byakagaba was also at the scene.

For the parents gathered, each click of the camera and each measured step was salt in the wound because it only stretched their patience and made them more anxious.

"Please, allow us to go and I see my child," Mr Okurut, wearing a sky blue shirt and dark trousers, pleaded with the officers who blocked him and other parents from entering the crime scene.

He knew, with a father's instinct, that the small body covered with a wrapper was his son. And he was right. His two-year-old son, Ryan Odeke, was the first victim of the assailant's knives.

The suspect, identified as Christopher Okello, 34, reportedly then turned his blades on Kaise Alungat, 2; Gideon Eteku, 2 and Ignatius Sserwange, 3.

Sserwange, Alungat, and Eteku sustained injuries but died later in hospital.

It was not established why the suspect, said to be from Nwoya District in northern Uganda, committed the act as investigations are underway.

One of the first responders, Mr Ismail Galabuzi, described the chaos that followed, saying he was told that when the suspect first stabbed the first child, the school employees rushed to stop him and a scuffle ensued.

"A male worker at the school made an alarm calling for help. He attempted to wrestle the suspect down and disarm him. In the scuffle, the suspect lost control of the knives and was disarmed," Mr Galabuzi said.

"The suspect attempted to flee the school by scaling the fence, but the security team of a nearby school had arrived. They pursued him. And with the help of the residents, they arrested him."

The residents called in the police, which arrived on time, and detained the suspect.

Ms Annet Komugisha, a resident, said community members and the child caretakers rushed the three injured children to Wentz Medical Centre, which is near the school, for treatment. However, when word spread that they had died, their grief turned to fury.

"When the residents found out that the kids had also died, they became so angry and demanded that the suspect be given to them for mob action," Ms Komugisha said.

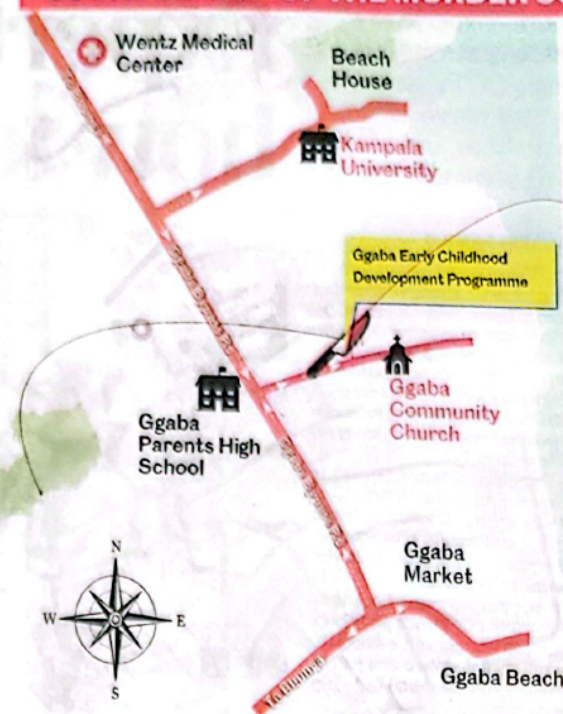
Mr Stanley Oketch, the legal representative of the school, tried to console the grieving families.

"We deeply condole with parents. The police have started the investigations. The police will competently pursue justice," Mr Oketch said.

He explained that the suspect had hidden behind the guise of a potential new parent to carry out his heinous crime.

Kampala Metropolitan Police Spokesperson Racheal Kawala said the suspect

LOCATOR MAP OF THE MURDER SCENE



Murder scene: Senior police officers, including IGP Abas Byakagaba, went to the crime scene yesterday.

Voices of grief at Gaba: What wrong did our children do?

had first visited the school two days earlier, pretending to seek admission for his child.

"The school administrators shared with him the admission details. Then he returned today (Thursday). Upon arrival, he visited the administrator and even paid Shs180,000 as the initial fees," Ms Kawala said.

But when leaving the premises, he allegedly pulled out concealed knives and grabbed one child after another, stabbing them repeatedly. The motive remains a mystery.

Police officers advised that Odeke's body be left untouched to allow forensic experts to collect evidence.

Once the news of the suspect's actions were revealed to the members of the public, they demanded that he be handed over to them for punishment but police stood in their way.

"The residents wanted the suspect to be burnt to death," Mr Galabuzi said.

The suspect was carrying four knives. The two knives that were left at the crime scene looked to be very new and of the same make. They appeared to be professional kitchen knives.

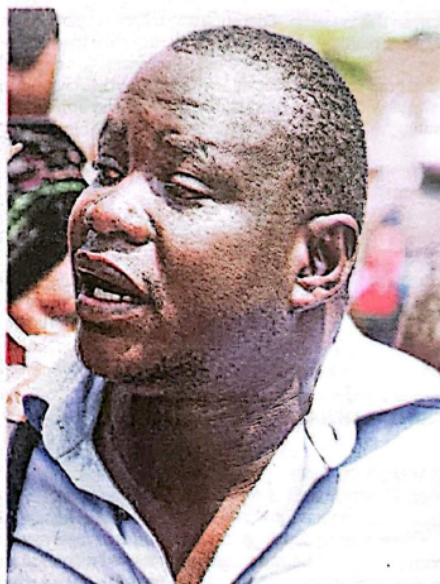
When the police officers declined to yield to their demands, the residents started demonstrating by blocking the roads with boulders and garbage, prompting the security personnel to call for reinforcement.

The suspect was then driven away by security personnel.

Parents from neighbouring schools rushed to the scene, desperate to see their children. Some tried to force their way in, but officers threatened to use force. A few were arrested, though later released once tempers cooled.

Police and residents struggled to restrain Mr Okurut, who could not bear being denied access to his son's body.

His pain was transmitted to other parents and the residents. They wanted to



One of the heartbroken parents. PHOTO/ IBRAHIM KAVUMA

forcefully access the scene, but the soldiers and the police officers blocked the roads to prevent an escalation.

By 3pm, forensic experts had finished their grim work. Survivors were handed back to their parents. The atmosphere was thick with contradictions with tears of joy from those reunited with their children, and wails of despair from those whose little ones would never return home.

Mr Karim Kazibwa, the father of Ali Kakaire, recalled how he received the news while at work in Konge Village.

"When I heard the sad news, I went into a panic mood. I ran on foot to this school to see my son," he said.

Relief washed over him when he found his boy unharmed. "I am very grateful to the Lord that he has spared the life of my child. It was God's grace."