



Begging. Street children beg on the streets of Kampala recently. As the government is trying to get rid of street children in Kampala, the problem has now shifted to upcountry towns such as Mbarara. PHOTO BY MICHAEL KAKUMIRIZI

Mbarara grapples with street children

Desperate. It is estimated that there are 100 street children in Mbarara Town who move around homes and business premises to beg.

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Voices

"These children are not a problem to Mbarara alone. They can be recruited into criminal gangs to carry out terrorist activities in the country. Government should resettle and rehabilitate these children," MR ROBERT MUGABE KAKYEBEZI, MBARARA MAYOR

"Street children are a menace; they are raping women and stealing but sometimes the victims do not report these cases to police," MR SAMSON KASASIRA, RWIZI REGION POLICE SPOKESPERSON

MBARARA. The increasing number of homeless children on the streets of Mbarara Town is worrying to both residents and authorities.

The residents have therefore implored government and charity organisations to take, rehabilitate and provide for them to bring sanity back to the town.

Street children are estimated to be more than 100. They move around homes and business premises begging.

Majority of them are said to be drug addicts and have reportedly turned into thieves and rapists. They are a common sight in the central business area, especially near the main roundabout, around High Street and Markhansingh Street.

Mr Alex Kwijuka, a business man on the High Street, says the street children are very aggressive and should be kept away to give people peace.

Mr Hassan Mukasa, another businessman near the main roundabout observes: "There used to be a few of them around here but they are now more than 20. They sniff fuel, gum and smoke marijuana in broad daylight but no one is bothered as if it is all normal."

Vendors and hawkers who op-

give them hard time.

Among the vendors is Ms Harriet Asasira, who sells food on Mbarara-Masaka road at night, says: "They demand money and food from women because they know we are weak. If you do not cooperate, you are in trouble. Some of us have resorted to befriending them for safety reasons."

They are a big network of criminals working hand-in-hand with some prostitutes, according to Mr Aggrey Kizito, a retail trader on Markhansingh Street.

"The corridors and bars around here are full of prostitutes at night. They work with street children to rob people who they spot carrying good money," Mr Kizito says.

He adds that some spend their loot on prostitutes, which exposes them to HIV infection.

Police confirms

The Rwizi region police spokesperson, Mr Samson Kasasira, says they do not have crime statistics because most of the cases involving them remain unreported.

"Street children are a menace; they are raping women and stealing but sometimes the victims do not report these cases to police," Mr Kasasira says.

He adds that absence of remand homes does not help the matter.

The responsibility of managing street children lies primarily with Mbarara Municipal Council.

The Mbarara mayor, Mr Robert

a remand home, managing street children can be a big challenge.

"Recently, we arrested 44 of them, but we could not detain them because we don't have a remand home. After arrest, some people come claiming for them. For others, we labour to look for their homes and take them but they come back. Without a remand home here, street children will remain a big problem," Mr Kakyebi says.

He says they have on several occasions reminded the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development of the urgency for a remand home in vain.

GOVT ROLE

Laws. The government has adopted strong domestic child protection legislation including the Children Act and laws prohibiting child labour. The Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development has created multiple programmes and policies intended to realize the rights of at-risk children such as the National Strategic Programme Plan of Interventions for Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children, which includes street children. And yet the government has failed to meet its obligations to protect children on the streets from abuse at the hands of the police, local authorities, and others, because of the shortcomings in the government's implementation of its child protection framework.

Causes. The Uganda Human Rights Commission notes that the government's approach of "resettling and rehabilitating street children without addressing the factors that send children to the streets"

The nearest remand home is in Fort portal, another one is being constructed in Kabale.

"Building remand homes has been a duty of the Central government through the ministry of gender. As Mbarara Municipality, our budget is overstretched. This is an expensive investment and government should take it up. We have to save the future generation," Mr Mugabe says.

He also blames parents and guardians saying they neglect their children.

Mr Kakyebi adds: "If a child lost his parents, he cannot fail to have a relative or caretaker. These are majorly to blame for the increase of street children."

Haji Abbas Kazibwe, the chairperson of Kakoba Division, says government should offer facilities to rehabilitate these children because wrong elements could use them against citizens.

"These children are not a problem to Mbarara alone. They can be recruited into criminal gangs to carry out terrorist activities in the country. Government should resettle and rehabilitate these children," Mr Kazibwe says.

Apostle Willy Tumwine; a senior pastor at Holy Spirit Fire Church, who looks after some street children, acknowledges that the number in town keeps increasing.

"I am taking care of more than 20 children. Some are in schools while others are under rehabilitation but you see, the number still growing," he notes.

He attributes this to govern-

ment's delay to give them land titles. Government through the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development started the systematic land demarcation nearly 11 years ago to primarily give land titles to squatters on the mailo land formerly owned by the "absentee landlords." Several people who never received their land titles have tasked the Lands ministry officials to explain the delays during a one day consultative meeting held at Bwanswa Sub-county headquarters on Tuesday. [Alex Tumuhimbise]

Schools urged

KAMWENGE: East Rwenzori Diocese Bishop George Turyasingura, has called upon the school board of governors, school management committees, head teachers, teachers and parents to create good learning environment for learners to perform well. Bishop Turyasingura made the call during press conference at his office at St Stephen's Cathedral in Kamwenge Town on Tuesday. He said education brings light in the development of the country and helps parents and families of educated people to boost the household income. [Fednand Tuhome]

Parents demand by-law

BUNYANGABU: Parents from Bunyangabu District have asked the district authorities to pass a by-law that will enable district authorities to start arresting parents who make their children absent from schools to do domestic works. Bunyangabu District Inspector of Schools Elasto Kasoro, while speaking during the district education conference at Kibito Secondary School on Tuesday, said some parents make their children not go to class but rather to work in markets and plantations. Mr Kasoro said it is the reason why some primary schools in the district performed poorly in last year's Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE). [Alex Ashaba]

Teenage births incre

KYEGEGWA: Kyegegwa district health officer, Dr T Kandole, has expressed concern over increasing teenage births in the district. Dr Kandole said this while referring to the health queries from patients on Tuesday. He said more than 50 teenagers give birth monthly within the district. About 90 per cent of the babies are operated during birth but they are not yet mature or deliver normally. Dr Kandole said to girls to always attend check-ups and avoid local