

Justice Alice Komuhangi Khaukha agreed with the prosecution that the case fell within the "rarest of the rare" category deserving of capital punishment.

BY ANTHONY WESAKA & JULIET KIGONGO

The High Court yesterday sentenced Christopher Okello Onyum to death by hanging for the murder of four toddlers at a daycare centre in Ggaba, in a ruling that underscores the gravity of one of the country's most disturbing crimes in recent years.

Justice Alice Komuhangi Khaukha handed down the maximum sentence, agreeing with the prosecution that the case fell within the "rarest of the rare" category deserving of capital punishment.

"I agree with the prosecution that this case falls in the rarest of the rare. Like the probation officer informed the court, when he made the inquiries in the communities, they said this kind of thing had never happened for four children to be killed just in a very short time by one person," ruled Justice Komuhangi.

She added: "In light of the above, I have found no reason why I should not sentence Mr Okello to the maximum sentence. I hereby sentence you to suffer death for the murder of Eteku Gideon for count one, Keisha Ageronwoth Otim, in count two, Sseruyange Ignatius in count three, and Odeke Ryan in count four in a manner authorised by law."

Okello was convicted of stabbing the four children to death using a kitchen knife after gaining access to the daycare centre on April 2, an attack that sent shockwaves across the country.

In her ruling, Justice Komuhangi said the killings were meticulously planned and executed, targeting vulnerable children in what should have been a place of safety.

Justification

"I have considered that the convict attacked defenceless children who depend on adults for their protection and survival," she said.

"He targeted them in broad daylight and slaughtered them in a most brutal manner," she added.

The judge also pointed to what she described as possible ritual motives behind the killings, noting that the nature of the crime suggested more than random violence.

"I would find no reason why someone would leave their home to slaughter children in their safe spaces unless it was for ritual purposes," she said, adding that the sentence should serve as a warning to those who believe in human sacrifice for wealth.

The court further observed that Okello showed no remorse throughout the trial, despite multiple opportunities to apologise to the victims' families.

"I have also considered that Okello has not shown any remorse at all. Because I would at least have expected an apology from him to the families of the babies whom he had slaughtered like chicken and goats. I realise he does not even imagine how those families are living without their children," Justice Komuhangi



Christopher Okello Onyum is brought to court under tight security at Ggaba Community Centre yesterday. PHOTOS/ABUBAKER LUBOWA

Court sends Okello to the gallows over Ggaba killings

observed.

"I am sure he watched the mother of the judge," Ms Jennifer Aliro, an aunt of the late Ageronwoth. Mr Aloyious Zziwa, the uncle of the late Ignatius Sseruyange, also welcomed the sentence, reasoning that since their children were brutally killed, Okello, who is responsible, should also die.

The other considerations that the judge factored in to sentence Okello to suffer death included: the commission of the offenses was planned or meticulously meditated and executed; not only are the families of these children still grieving, but the entire nation of Uganda still grieves at the loss of four innocent souls whose destinies were cut short by the barbaric actions of Okello.

"I have considered the fact that Okello meticulously, with a lot of sophistication, planned and meditated this offense," the judge observed.

The other court considerations were his attack on defenseless innocent children who depend on others for their protection and survival, his targeting of the children in broad daylight, and went on to slaughter them like animals.

"I have also considered that if he was not apprehended, who knows he would have killed more than four," the judge held.

Following the handing down of the highest sentence to Okello, ululations filled up the makeshift courtroom with some community members and relatives of the deceased victims, welcoming the death sentence.

"The judge has ruled very well, the judge has ruled very well... she was very fair like a parent," Mr Samuel Kamya, a local leader, said in excitement.

Another unidentified resident was heard shouting at the top of his voice that where the four children went, is

where Okello is going.

"I'm happy with the decision of the judge," Ms Jennifer Aliro, an aunt of the late Ageronwoth. Mr Aloyious Zziwa, the uncle of the late Ignatius Sseruyange, also welcomed the sentence, reasoning that since their children were brutally killed, Okello, who is responsible, should also die.

"Since our children died and will not return, it means that Okello should not be alive on this earth. He broke our hearts, let his family also feel it," he said.

While passing her judgment, Justice Komuhangi dismissed the defence's claim that Okello was mentally ill at the time of the killings, ruling that his conduct before and during the attack reflected a person aware of his actions.

BACKGROUND

Mandatory death penalty

abolished: In the case of Susan Kigula & 417 Others vs. Attorney General (2009), the Supreme Court ruled that automatic, mandatory death sentences violate the Constitution by denying judges the discretion to consider mitigating circumstances.

Death penalty still

constitutional: While the mandatory aspect was removed, the Supreme Court affirmed that the penalty itself remains a legal punishment in Uganda for the "most serious crimes, the rarest of the rare".

"The accused was very sane in April when committing these offences. Therefore, his defence of insanity won't help him," ruled Justice Komuhangi.

Adding: "I hear by convict Christopher Okello Onyum for the murder of Eteku Gideon, Keisha Ageronwoth, Sseruyange Ignatius, and Odeke Ryan."

Upon convicting Okello, the general public clapped in agreement.

The judge noted that evidence presented in court showed Okello had behaved normally prior to the incident, contradicting assertions that he was suffering from a mental condition that would absolve him of criminal responsibility.

Justice Komuhangi further pointed to the accused's online searches, including material related to beheadings by the terrorist group ISIS, as indicative of prior planning. She held that Okello appeared to have drawn from such content, executing the killings in a calculated and methodical manner that saw him slaughter the toddlers within just a short period of seven minutes.

During the mitigation session, Chief State Attorney Muwaganya prayed for the maximum punishment on the grounds that murder is on the increase and that there was a need for the court to send out strong signals.

He cited the annual police crime report that last year, 4238 people were killed, meaning that over four villages were wiped out just like that.

He based his arguments on statistics from the Uganda National Bureau of Statistics Uboas that show that a standard village in Uganda has between 500 and 1,000 people.

"When sentences are light, there is an incentive to commit a crime. My lord, I have been instructed by the DPP to in-

form the court that the only way we can achieve our vision of a crime-free Uganda is by imposing deterrent sentences," he submitted.

"When crime is not punished, people feel safe to do wrong," he added.

He also submitted that Okello attacked the children while they were in their safe spaces.

"A daycare centre is supposed to be a sanctuary, a place of laughter, learning, and absolute serenity. To the contrary, my lord, the convicts turned the centre into a scene of a well-calculated massacre, which caused unimaginable terror in the community and the country at large. My lord, the convicts participated in an extremely violent crime," he said.

On the contrary, Ms Sarah Awero, Okello's lawyer, began by saying that children are angels in the Bible. "We pray that the souls of the children rest in peace and we speak healing to the community," Ms Awero said in a low tone.

She also cited Okello's social background, which was to the effect that he comes from a broken and dysfunctional family.

"The siblings don't talk to each other. This social gap is deep in the family and broken and dysfunctional families always leads to broken and dysfunctional people. And as a society, we need to work hard and see that every family that is broken and dysfunctional gets back together," she said.

Uganda last carried out executions in 1999, when 28 inmates were hanged at Luzira, although the death penalty remains on the statute books. Okello was informed of his right to appeal within 14 days before he was led away in handcuffs and leg chains to Luzira Prison.