Blind defiler charged with trafficking in persons

By Henry Nsubuga

Mukono Chief Magistrates' Court has charged a 44-year-old blind man with trafficking in persons after he pleaded guilty to defilement.

Appearing before Chief Magistrate Paul Matyama last week, Ivan Birungi, a resident of Kasana East ward in Mubende district, admitted to defiling a 15-year-old girl. The magistrate convicted him on his own plea of guilty and set March 2 for sentencing.

However, when Birungi returned to court on Monday expecting a lenient sentence, the prosecution team, led by Mukono Senior Resident State Attorney Josephine Nanyonga, read out an additional charge of trafficking in persons.

Birungi pleaded not guilty to the second count, prompting the prosecution to call witnesses, including the victim and her father, a resident of Kanyegalamire village in Kakumiro district.

Court heard that Birungi allegedly hired the teenager as a domestic helper, citing his visual impairment. While Birungi told court that he had sought the girl's consent from her parents to help with household chores, the victim testified that her parents had not authorised the arrangement.

"Birungi communicated with our neighbour, Gift, who is known for linking teenage girls from our village in Kakumiro to domestic work opportunities in Kampala. With Gift's help, I ran away from home at around 9:30pm on February 1. I spent the night at her home and at about 4:00am she put me in a taxi," the girl told court.

BLIND WOMAN

She said Gift had informed her that she would be helping a blind woman and promised her a salary of sh150,000. Instead, she found a blind man waiting for her at the taxi park.

"They had agreed to pay sh30,000 for my transport, but he only paid sh20,000. From there, we hired a bodaboda which took us to a lodge," she said. The girl told court that Birungi rejected her request to sleep in separate rooms.

PHOTO BY HENRY NSUBUGA



Prisons officers lead Ivan Birungi, a 44-year-old blind man, out of court shortly after he was convicted of defiling a 15-year-old girl

"He told me that if I did not want to share the room, I could sleep outside. I slept on the floor while he was on the bed. At about 10:00pm, he came for me. I tried to fight him but he overpowered me. After realising I was a virgin, he boasted and promised to take care of me, saying he had enough money," she testified. The proceedings were conducted in the chief magistrate's chambers to protect the minor.

The victim's father told court that his daughter was born in 2011 and had been in Primary Four last year, but declined to return to school this year. He said the family began searching for her when she went missing.

"What was strange is that Gift, whom we later discovered was at the centre of taking her from our home, actively participated in the search," he said.

The family was relieved when the girl called on the fourth day to say she was safe and had travelled to Kampala for domestic work.

The victim later told court that after being sexually abused twice, she developed pain and asked Birungi for transport back home.

Instead, he relocated with her to Mukono, where she said he continued to mistreat and beat her. She eventually confided in a lodge attendant, who alerted a customer, leading to Birungi's arrest. Birungi claimed he did not know the girl was under-age due to his visual impairment. However, she testified that she told him she was 14 when they met.

The prosecution urged court to impose a deterrent sentence, presenting evidence that Birungi was not a first-time offender, having previously faced similar offences of defilement and trafficking in persons at Mubende Chief Magistrates' Court.

The chief magistrate adjourned the case to today (Wednesday, March 4), when he will sentence Birungi.