

naviour, calm, cooperative, with coherent speech, intact memory, and exhibit-

his pockets as he was being escorted to a police patrol vehicle.

trachea, oesophagus, major blood vessels and nerves, with fractures to the C5

Wentz Medical Centre but were pronounced dead on arrival.

If convicted, Okello faces the maximum death penalty.

Ggaba attack: Experts question direct link between mental illness and violence

BY TONNY ABET

KAMPALA. The brutal attack at Ggaba Early Childhood Development Programme last Thursday, which claimed the lives of four toddlers, has left Uganda in shock and grief.

In the aftermath, questions have emerged about whether untreated mental health issues may have played a role, and whether claims of mental illness could be exploited to evade accountability. The public debate intensified after the suspect's family said 39-year-old Christopher Okello Onyum had sought mental health treatment in the past.

Okello allegedly posed as a parent interested in enrolling a child. After briefly interacting with school staff and paying an admission fee of Shs195,000, he locked the gate and launched a vicious attack on toddlers aged two to three years: Gideon Ete-

ku, Kaise Agenorwot, Ryan Odeke, and Ignatius Sserwange. Police arrested Okello at the scene. He appeared before Chief Magistrate's Court in Makindye, where he was charged with four counts of murder, and was remanded to Luzira Prison.

Many Ugandans have described the incident as a carefully planned act, casting doubt that someone of unsound mind could execute it with such calculation.

Mental health professionals caution against assumptions linking mental illness and violent behaviour.

Ms Mercy Gracy Omona, a clinical psychologist and Head of Secretariat for the Uganda Parliamentary Forum on Mental Health, said the majority of people with mental health challenges are not violent.

"Many are more likely to be vulnerable and in need of care, protection, and understanding. It is, therefore, inaccurate and harmful to generalise such incidents as being caused by mental illness,"

Mental health. Clinical evidence shows that the vast majority of people with mental health conditions are never violent. However, untreated severe

conditions, social isolation, and distorted beliefs can increase risk,"

— Male M. Ali, counselling psychologist.

she told *Daily Monitor*.

Ms Omona acknowledged that severe psychological distress can manifest as confusion, social withdrawal, extreme mood changes, unusual behaviour, or difficulty coping. Left unaddressed and combined with environmental pressures, situations can escalate. She stressed that early recognition, community support, and professional assessment are critical.

"Avoid attributing acts of violence solely to mental health without proper evaluation. Such assumptions increase stigma and discourage people from seeking care," she said.

The American Psychological Association notes that factors such as childhood abuse, unemployment, and high-crime environments often drive violent behaviour more than mental illness itself. Studies show people with mental illness are far more likely to be victims than perpetrators of violence.

Dr Heather Stuart of Canada's Queen's University, in a report published in *World Psychiatry*, observed that mental disorders are neither necessary nor sufficient causes of violence. Socio-demographic and economic factors—being young, male, and of lower socio-economic status—remain the major determinants.

She highlighted substance abuse as a key contributor to violence, whether or not concurrent mental illness is present.

Mr Male M. Ali, a counselling psychologist and co-director of A_Z Professional Counselling and Support Centre, echoed these findings, noting nuances in severe cases.

"Clinical evidence shows that the vast majority of people with mental health conditions are never violent. However, untreated severe conditions, social isolation, and distorted beliefs can increase risk," he said.

Experts stress that the focus should be on solutions: raising public awareness, reducing stigma, improving access to mental health services, and building supportive community systems.

"Moving forward, the focus should be on strengthening awareness, improving access to mental health services, and building supportive community systems that prioritise prevention, timely intervention, and collective responsibility," Ms Omona said.