What next after 'not guilty' plea?

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BY ANTHONY WESAKA & JULIET KIGONGO

The trial of Christopher Okello Onyum, the prime suspect in the killing of four toddlers at Ggaba Early Childhood Development Programme, has entered a critical evidentiary phase after he yesterday pleaded not guilty to four counts of murder before the High Court.

Okello, 38, denied all the charges during a mobile public court session presided over by Justice Alice Komuhangi Khaukha at Ggaba Community grounds, where the killings occurred on April 2.

"Not guilty," he replied in an American accent when asked by the judge how he pleaded to the first count.

His response drew audible shock from members of the public who had turned up in large numbers to witness the proceedings, with some booing from the crowd before the judge cautioned them to maintain order.

With the 'not guilty' plea entered, the case now moves into the full trial stage, where the prosecution bears the burden of proving beyond reasonable doubt that Okello committed the murders.

The prosecution team, led by Chief State Attorney Jonathan Muwaganya and Ms Anna Kiiza, immediately opened its case by parading 11 witnesses expected to testify on the circumstances surrounding the deadly attack that stunned the country.

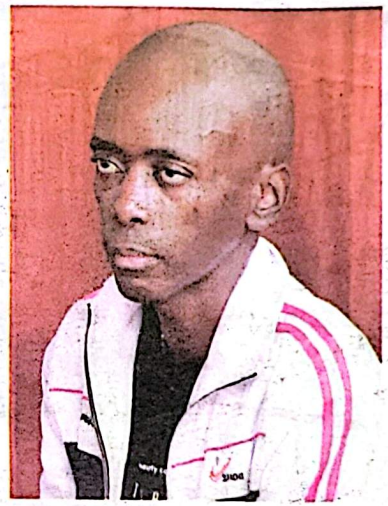
Among the first pieces of evidence tendered before the court was the postmortem report prepared by Dr Abdul Katongole, which indicated that all four toddlers died of hypovolemic shock caused by deep neck wounds.

According to the report, Eteku Gideon and Sseruyange Ignatius each sustained 14-centimetre deep cuts to the neck, while Keisha Agenorwoth Otim and Odeke Ryan suffered 9-centimetre wounds.

Although Dr Katongole did not physically appear in court, the prosecution presented and tendered the postmortem findings as evidence on his behalf.

The trial then shifted into emotional witness testimony, with all four parents of the deceased children taking the stand to recount the events of the fateful day.

The courtroom atmosphere turned tense and emotional as one of the parents, Ms Stella Apolot, fainted while testifying under the weight of grief. She was carried away by a team from the Red Cross.



Christopher Okello Onyum.

Other parents who testified included Mr Marvin Komaketch Otim, father of Agenorwoth; Mr Lawrence Mbazira, father of Sseruyange; and Mr Simon Okurut, father of Ryan.

A key moment in the proceedings came with the testimony of Ms Phoebe Namutebi, 34, the caretaker of the daycare centre and the sixth prosecution witness.

In a detailed account, Ms Namutebi told the court that the accused first visited the facility a day before the killings, presenting himself as a parent seeking admission for a child.

PROCEEDINGS

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"That gentleman came to our daycare centre... he told me he had a child about three years old who was not social and could not speak well," she testified.

She said she informed him that the centre only admits children below three years and advised him to try the nearby nursery section.

According to her testimony, the suspect returned the following day carrying a child's bag and expressed readiness to pay the fees.

"He told me he had come to finalise what we had discussed," she said.

Ms Namutebi further testified that Okello later claimed he was not the child's father but a Good Samaritan assisting a struggling mother, before paying Shs195,000 via mobile money and receiving a receipt under the name Zuriel Onyum.

Moments later, she said, the situation turned deadly.

"Shortly after the transaction, I saw the accused outside through a window, bent over a child," she told the court.

"I thought he was beating the child... but when I rushed there, I found one child in a pool of blood."

In what became one of the most chilling testimonies of the day, Ms Namutebi said the attacker moved swiftly from one child to another while armed with a knife.

"He was so quick... I saw him grab another child and put them down. I understood he was going to murder another child," she testified.

She said she desperately tried to stop him by throwing children's bicycles at him and raising an alarm, but the suspect allegedly chased her before turning back to the victims.

"I fell three times... I thought he was going to kill me," she said.

According to her account, the attacker killed the children in silence, breathing heavily throughout the ordeal.

Ms Namutebi said men who responded to the alarm eventually subdued the suspect and locked him in a security room to protect him from an enraged mob that wanted to lynch him.

She also told the court that one of the children died in her arms as she tried to render assistance.

The hearing is expected to continue tomorrow, when the defence lawyers are expected to cross-examine her on her testimony. The prosecution will also line up more witnesses.

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