

Parents in Uganda cult led children to death

BUNYARIGI, Uganda (AP) — After her young grandchildren's abrupt departure, after the gas-fueled flames and the charred remains, 74-year-old Margaret Kibetenga wonders if there's something she could have done.

On Dec. 28, her daughter-in-law came to her mud-walled home to fetch two children she had left in Kibetenga's care. Saying she needed to take them to visit a sick relative, Jane Ayebare began packing her youngsters' belongings.

When Ayebare muttered something about the end of the world being near, Kibetenga thought little of it. Ayebare had joined a strange religious group, but as far as Kibetenga was concerned, she was still Catholic.

Of course, the world didn't end Dec. 31, as the sect had predicted. But for Ayebare and her four children, life ended 10 weeks later in the flames of a sealed chapel be-

longing to Uganda's doomsday cult.

They were not alone. Terrified, trusting or willingly marching off to glory, children of the cult streamed out of hill villages by the hundreds to die trapped in the flames of the sealed church or by ropes and knives in the hands of grown-ups.

Children made up a large part of the bodies recovered from mass graves in southwestern Uganda since the March 17 inferno at the chapel at Kanungu alerted the world, and some Ugandans, to the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God. Authorities now are pursuing the sect's leaders, who they believe masterminded the murders of at least 924 people.

"I never took it seriously," Kibetenga now says, her eyes dropping to the ground.

For the movement, childhood was an occasion of sin. "These days ... the majority of the youths go to hell; only very few

go to heaven in a day," its handbook states. The sect's leaders went to brutal lengths to ensure children wouldn't fall into what they believed were the clutches of Satan.

"These days ... the majority of the youths go to hell; only very few go to heaven in a day."

— Ugandan cult handbook

In the early 1990s, Credonia Mrewinde, one of the movement's founders, forced 60 children to live in a 15-by-40-foot backyard shed in the village of Kabumba, according to Juvenal Rugambwa, son of sect leader Joseph Kibwetere. He said the shed's windows were

nailed shut and the children forced to sleep on the dirt floor, where many contracted scabies, a contagious skin disease. Children and their parents were

placed in separate living quarters when they joined the sect, Rugambwa and former sect members said. Parents also were forced to withdraw their children from school.

Rev. Paolino Tomaino, who became acquainted with the sect when he worked

in Kabumba from 1976 to 1989, says it was inevitable that the children would follow their parents, even to their deaths. "You would expect a Uganda child to follow his parent," Tomaino said. "They were with their parents. I'm sure they couldn't leave."

John Katebalirwe sold his mud hut for \$30, then forced his wife, 27-year-old married daughter and her seven younger brothers and sisters away to attend a gathering at sect headquarters in Kanungu. Neighbors say the wife and eight children went with him unwillingly.

"He told us he was going to pray in Kanungu," said Aida Kaguze, who bought the hut from Katebalirwe. "They had heard from God, and they were going to meet Jesus."

On March 8, Katarina Tumuhimbise's daughters, aged 8 and 14, left the remote western foothill village of Sweswe with

adults who were leading other the March 18 dedication of the at the sect's home in Kanungu.

Residents in Sweswe said the sect's members couldn't afford to go to the chapel, so they stayed behind with younger children at their mud huts by a shrine with straw prayer figures of Jesus, the Virgin Mary and

Tumuhimbise, rosaries draped over her neck as she spoke to a group of members as well and said the sect had taken her children. Her father chased after them, but

Their daughters were among sect members on March 17 at the chapel on the sect's main road in Kanungu to pray. Within they were enveloped by what believe was a gas-fueled fire, an explosive combination of sulphuric acid.

Congolese rebels accuse government of attacks

KIGALI, Rwanda (AP) — As Congo slides back into war, Congolese rebels on Sunday said they had killed at least 20 government troops in fresh attacks by President Laurent Kabila's army.

Rebel spokesperson Kin-Kiey Mulumba said the Rwandan-backed rebels had fought off government attacks at Maloba and Kisele in southern, diamond-rich Kasai Province, killing 17 soldiers and capturing one. The fighting last week also left five rebels wounded, two of them in critical condition in a hospital in the eastern rebel stronghold of Goma.

"We're fighting every day. There is no cease-fire," Mulumba said on telephone from Goma.

Despite a peace accord last August between Kabila and the rebels, fighting has resumed in Congo, frustrating efforts by the United Nations to deploy 5,500 U.N. cease-fire observers and troops to protect them.

So far, more than 100 U.N. observers have been deployed in both government- and rebel-controlled Congo. But U.N. officials have warned that additional deployment will not be possible unless fighting ends.

The peace accord was signed by rebel supporters Rwanda and Uganda, as well as Zimbabwe, Angola and Namibia, who

back Kabila. According to the deal, a cease-fire is supposed to be followed by the withdrawal of foreign troops from Congo and the disarmament of Rwandan and Burundian Hutu militia fighting alongside Kabila's army.

Meanwhile, the government set May 10 as the date for elections, the first since Kabila took power by force in 1997. He currently rules without a legislature.

Interior Minister Gaetan Kakudji announced the date at a ceremony Saturday launching a five-member government office that will organize the vote. Kabila has said the 300-member body will involve the Congolese people in running the country and its defense, but he has not specified its powers and functions.

The major opposition parties, however, have said they want nothing to do with the new assembly. They say the move is an attempt to bypass a national dialogue on Congo's political future.

Kabila was expected Monday at an African-European summit in Cairo, together with Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe and Angola's Jose Eduardo dos Santos. African and European foreign ministers meeting before the summit agreed that there would be no specific mention of Africa's various conflicts, although they did agree to promote conflict resolution.

Elian's father prepares to travel to U.S. for son

HAVANA (AP) — President Fidel Castro said Elian Gonzalez's father was willing to travel alone to the United States Monday morning if U.S. officials promise to turn over the boy to him and let them return to Cuba right away.

Failing that, visas would be sought for father Juan Miguel Gonzalez and an entourage of more than 30 people to leave for the United States as early as Tuesday to try to get Elian back, Castro said Sunday during a live appearance on national television.

The announcement was made in a letter signed by Gonzalez, which Castro read. Gonzalez sat in the television audience, looking distraught and exhausted.

"I am willing to leave tomorrow, absolutely alone and transport myself to where the child is," Castro read from the letter. After picking up the child, the letter said, father and son would "return immediately to Cuba," said Castro.

Last week, Castro said Gonzalez was willing to travel to the United States and wait out the results of an appeal for custody by their Miami relatives in federal appellate court, if the U.S. government gave him custody of Elian in the meantime.

Castro announced Sunday that the chief of the Cuban Interests Section in Washington was willing to give up diplo-

matic immunity over his residence in Washington, if the communist government has proposed Gonzalez was at the residence with Elian during the appeal. That proposal aimed at reassuring U.S. officials that U.S. authority in the case would be accepted regardless of the outcome of the appeal.

The Justice Department has given the boy's grandfather, Lázaro Gonzalez, until Tuesday to sign a promise to order Elian if he and his family lose their court battle. Gonzalez has so far refused to sign such a pledge.

Before the announcement, Castro was shown on national television playing the affectionate grandfather to first-grade classmates who plan to travel with their father to keep Elian company while waiting for the court to run its course.

The boys and girls, wearing their red and white school forms, stared up from their blue plastic seats in the studio at the tall uniformed man with the graying hair.

Patting some of the kids on the head, Castro assured that they formed a powerful "commando."

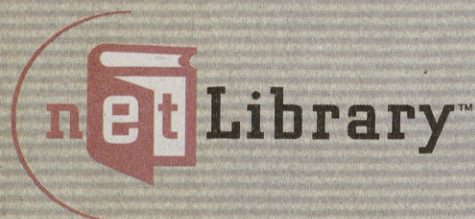
"Not even the Pentagon can handle these kids," he said. "We are hoping that they get their visas."

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