News
Ministry



Kenyan authorities continue to retrieve bodies from shallow graves in an 800-acre ranch in Kilifi County near the town of Malindi. All victims were followers of the Good News International Church Pastor Paul Mackenzie. He allegedly told followers to pray and fast to meet Jesus and that the world would end April 15. (OSV News/Courtesy of Sheshi Visual Arts/Moses Mpuria)



by Doreen Ajiambo

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Morris Yimbo is struggling to come to terms with losing his three sons in a starvation cult in the forest of Shakahola, a deeply traditional remote village of southeastern Kenya.

Paul Mackenzie, a self-proclaimed pastor who in 2003 founded the Good News International Church, is believed to have lured and brainwashed more than 100 of his followers — including children — into starving themselves to death in order to meet Jesus Christ. According to survivors, some were killed. As of May 1, officials had exhumed 110 bodies from Mackenzie's property, according to The Associated Press.

Yimbo, 46, said his brother Wickliffe Omondi lured Yimbo's eldest son Vincent Lihanda, 21, into the cult in 2020 before his two younger siblings Godwin Maxwell, 17, and Collins Lijodi,14, followed him. Yimbo said that during the pandemic school closures, his brother — a staunch follower of Mackenzie — escaped with his children to the forest in Shakahola, about 570 miles from their home in Kisumu.

"My children had started developing weird behaviors, and they [would] go for night vigils with my brother without my consent," he told Global Sisters Report, adding that he tracked his children for several months with the help of the police after they disappeared. On March 15, his search ended when he found their bodies buried in shallow graves in Shakahola forest. "The survivors told me my sons were strangled to death while trying to escape fasting."

Yimbo is among hundreds of people who have lost their loved ones to Mackenzie's starvation cult. The police are still searching Mackenzie's 800-acre parcel of land for more bodies, as reports from the Kenya Red Cross Society show that hundreds more remain missing. Some cult followers are reported to be fasting currently in the forest, though the police have already rescued dozens of them.



Preacher Paul Mackenzie, leader of the religious commune based in Malindi's Shakahola forest, appears at Malindi Law Courts, May 2 in Malindi town on the Kenyan coast. Mackenzie was arrested for allegedly directing his followers to fast to death in order to meet Jesus. (AP photo)

Religious sisters and other church leaders have condemned what has been dubbed the "Shakahola Forest Massacre," castigating rogue religious leaders hiding behind Scripture.

To avert activities that may bring death to the faithful, church leaders across denominations have urged the government to regulate church institutions and review their 2015 proposals on the rules and regulation that should guide religious bodies. The proposals include requiring clerics to have a theology certificate from recognized theological institutions to start or operate a church, and for churches to submit their doctrines, recommendation letters from other religious organizations, and state the activities of the church before they are allowed to operate.

According to The Associated Press, Mackenzie was arrested in mid-April "over links to cultism for asking his followers to starve to death in order to meet Jesus." Mackenzie is in custody with his wife, Rhoda Mumbua Maweu, who is also accused of aiding her husband.

"Whatever is happening is completely evil and madness," said Sr. Bridgita Mwawasi Samba, member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Mombasa. She is also the secretary-general for the Association of Consecrated Women in Eastern and Central Africa. "Rogue elements are taking advantage of innocent people and killing them. The government should regulate churches to prevent such deaths from happening in the future."



Daughter of the Sacred Heart Sr. Josephine Kangogo (Lourine Oluoch)

Sr. Josephine Kangogo, chairperson for the Association of Sisterhoods of Kenya, said that using the name of Jesus Christ to kill people is "disgusting."

"This situation raises the question of how deep our faith is as Christians," said Kangogo, a Daughter of the Sacred Heart .

While expressing his anger, Bishop Willybard Kitogho Lagho of the Diocese of Malindi told GSR that through his investigations, he discovered that Mackenzie left his preaching ministry in 2019 after police questioned him about his church's activities. He said Mackenzie started engaging in the real estate business after acquiring land in Shakahola that same year.

Lagho noted that Mackenzie encouraged his followers to come and purchase part of his 800 acres and live with him as they pursued heaven. Unfortunately, hundreds followed his call.

"However, I think when [Mackenzie's followers] ran out of cash, he revived his ministry and brainwashed people into praying until they see Jesus," he said, echoing the testimonies of witnesses and survivors.

'I believed Mackenzie'

Cult survivors receiving treatment at the Malindi Sub County Hospital are frail, emaciated, shaking and struggling to speak.

One of the survivors is a 45-year-old father of three from Kakamega, a town in western Kenya, who said he knew the cult leader in 2018. A friend had lured him to one of Mackenzie's church services with the hope that the cult leader could pray for him to get a job.

"I believed Mackenzie after he told us that he daily speaks to God. He told us to sell all our belongings and join him in Shakahola," he recalled as he struggled to breathe. He was manipulated into selling his ancestral land and a few of his belongings and left for Shakahola with his family in 2021. "He told us to give him money so he could give us part of his land to stay with him as we wait to see Jesus."



Kenyan authorities continue to retrieve bodies from shallow graves in the 800-acre ranch in Kilifi County near the town of Malindi. (OSV News/Courtesy of Sheshi Visual Arts/Moses Mpuria)

Survivors at the hospital told GSR that Mackenzie instructed them not to allow their children to go to school, avoid hospitals, burn all school certificates, sell their belongings and live on his land in Shakahola, and fast to death as the only way to see Jesus.

Kenya, like other African countries, is not new to cult-related scandals. But the latest mass casualties are the deadliest in the predominantly Christian country, mirroring the cult deaths in Uganda where in early 2000, at least 700 members from the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God burned to death.

Religious analysts told GSR that some fake pastors, especially from evangelicals and Pentecostal churches, are widely exploiting desperate Kenyans who trust church institutions to benefit themselves and, in the worst-case scenarios, can lead to their

deaths.

Edith Kayeli Chamwama, a professor in religious studies, said a toxic cocktail of poverty, unemployment, poor education, lack of social support, and political instability have helped cults thrive in Kenya, where fake pastors use religion as a cover to carry out their illegal activities that harm society.

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"We have all sorts of denominations, yet people are seeking answers that they feel are not being provided wherever they are, so they keep moving, hoping to find them in the next church," said Chamwama, who is also a lecturer at the University of Nairobi. "Therefore, when people find a pastor who has answers or solutions to their problems, then he is considered a hero or savior to them."

Mackenzie's movement has classic characteristics of a cult, she said, as he claimed having visions from God. "He then begins by talking about what is familiar to many people — Jesus Christ. So, one does not suspect him at this point, as he is seen to be within the mainstream doctrines," while slowly growing a following.

"With time, his followers gain trust in him and are beholden to him," she continued. "His word becomes the truth and law; they do not question or reason through. Anyone who questions is seen as a dissenter and swiftly silenced, with some experiencing severe punishment."

Church calls for action

The Catholic Church in Kenya has called for thorough investigations into the deaths and illegal activities that so-called prophets and cultic leaders carry out in the name of Christianity.

Nairobi's Archbishop Philip Arnold Subira Anyolo said the church is pushing the government to take action against exploitative pastors, and that all religious leaders and faith-based organizations need to be investigated and regulated to ensure that any cleric starting a church should have attained some formal education to help them teach official doctrine.

The government, he told GSR, "should ensure that every church undergoes scrutiny to avoid this religious extremism," and that churches should be given a mandate to

run schools, because "children who are taught Christian values at an early age cannot be lured into cults."



Kenyan authorities retrieve bodies from shallow graves in the 800-acre ranch in Kilifi County near the town of Malindi. As of May 1, the death toll was 110, according to The Associated Press. (OSV News/Courtesy of Sheshi Visual Arts/Moses Mpuria)

Kangogo said the shocking deaths in Shakahola have prompted religious sisters to start strategizing how they can increase awareness of the true Gospel, so that people can be rooted in the word of God and avoid pastors swaying them through fake miracles.

"We want now to increase advocacy and evangelize in a deeper manner for people to realize that we serve Jesus Christ, who is in the Bible, and not the one these fake pastors are bringing for them," she said.

Samba said she is planning for sisters from various congregations to come together and strategize to carry out awareness across the country, with the hopes of saving

millions of people prone to joining cultism. However, she urged the government to follow "Rwanda's way," where President Paul Kagame in 2018 closed more than 8,000 churches and dozens of mosques for failing to comply with building regulations and noise pollution.



Sr. Bridgita Mwawasi Samba, a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Mombasa (Wycliff Oundo)

Kagame's administration tightened rules on registration and the functions of churches to kick out rogue pastors who take advantage of their desperate followers. He led the parliament to pass several laws, including requiring religious leaders to have a theology degree before starting their own churches, and for the government to audit the financial accounts of the churches.

"As religious people, we need to work together to end cults in the country," Samba said. "We are very ready to have the constitution amended, even if it means going the Rwanda way. We cannot continue losing people on religious grounds."

Meanwhile, in Malindi, the epicenter of Mackenzie's alleged massacre, Lagho is directing diocesan leaders in an awareness campaign to ensure locals are taught official doctrines, visiting congregants in their homes to teach them about Jesus Christ so that rogue pastors do not sway them away. He also said they have formed a commission for interreligious dialogue, with Muslims, Hindus and traditionalists.

"We are working together to ensure no one among leaders engages in cultism," he said. "If any one of us discovers any cult activities in our region, he is supposed to report to the commission for further actions, including reporting to the authorities and carrying out deradicalization among affected congregants."

Lagho also said they are carrying out spiritual counseling among their congregants to understand their needs so that they can help them better.

"People are stressed and need personalized care rather than catechism teachings only," he emphasized. "If our mainstream churches do not handle emotional stress, people will look for solutions elsewhere."