

WORLD & NATION

Virgin Mary 'tape' at core of cult's fatal allure

By Declan Walsh
Catholic News Service

KAMPALA, Uganda (CNS) - A tape recording reputed to be that of the Virgin Mary's voice helped convert many to the Ugandan Christian sect that apparently committed mass suicide.

As many as 500 people may have died in a blaze in the church of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments the night of March 17.

The doors of the church were locked and the windows had been nailed shut. The sect's followers had been expecting the end of the world.

The sect leadership, which included an excommunicated Catholic politician who founded the group, Joseph Kibwetere, 68, and two suspended Catholic priests, claimed to have received regular visitations from the Virgin Mary. The skeptical were converted using the tape recording, which was heard by a local nun, Our Lady of Good Counsel Sister Stella Maris.

"A woman's voice said: 'I see that the world is suffering. Now I want to come down and restore the Ten Commandments,'" she said, speaking outside the church where the sect faithful perished in the fire.

Testimonies of claimed visitations from the Virgin Mary were also contained in a book the sect sold for 4,000 shillings (US\$2.67). The book contained several chapters opposed to Catholic doctrine.

The Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments was led by Kibwetere and two suspended Catholic priests, Joseph Kasipurari, 38, and Dominic Kataribaho, 64.

All three are thought to have perished in the blaze. Kibwetere's son, Maurice Rugambwa, said his father had predicted



Reuters/CNS

A Ugandan boy masks the stench with rosemary at the scene of a mass suicide in Kanungu, Uganda, March 19. Some 500 people were found burned to death at the compound of the "Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God." Some of the cult leaders were suspended Catholic priests.

the mass suicide in a letter just days earlier, local papers reported.

On March 20, the bodies of five people, believed to have been murdered, were discovered in the compound's pit latrines.

Visiting the scene that day, Ugandan Minister for Internal Affairs Edward Rugumayo said he was "99 percent certain" those who perished committed suicide. This would make the mass suicide the second largest in living memory. The largest was the death of 914 followers of a cult led by a U.S. pastor Jim Jones in Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978.

However, regional police commander

Stephen Okwalinga said he was treating the affair as a "murder/suicide." Many local people believe that while the leaders were aware of the suicide plan, many of the sect's followers were not.

The local Catholic priest, Father Christopher Busingye, visited the compound one week before the fire.

"The people looked miserable," he said. "They moved aimlessly around the compound, very quietly," he said.

He said he had gone to the compound to buy beans. The sect members were selling their property and their belongings.

"They told me it was to buy a new jeep

and an electricity generator. I did not suspect a thing," he said.

Two leaders spoke on behalf of the sect, whose followers were forbidden from speaking.

"I asked them why they were preaching the end of the world. They said it was coming, but I never imagined it would happen this way," he said.

A stream of local people and relatives of the dead visited the sect's compound March 20. They clutched sprigs of rosemary to their noses as they silently filed past the piles of charred bodies inside the rough church building.

Charles Agaba lost his mother and three of his children in the blaze. His mother was converted, then she brought the three children, aged 11 to 14, to live with her on the compound in the village of Kunungu.

"They tried to convince me to join as well. They said the world was going to end and we should be saved, but I saw they were telling lies," he said.

The compound buildings, which followers believed were their Noah's Ark, were found empty after the blaze. A few garlands hung from the roof of a second church building, the only evidence of a huge party held by the followers before dousing themselves in gasoline and burning to death. The majority of the sect's followers were women, according to nurse Rose Birungi.

In a statement released March 20, the Ugandan bishops decried the "barbaric act" of "this unfortunate massacre," and expressed condolences to families and friends who lost loved ones.

Bishop Robert Gay of Kabale stated that the sect's followers had been "misled by obsessed leaders into a form of religiosity completely rejected by the Catholic Church."



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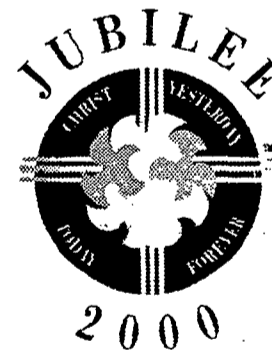
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