

# TESTIMONY

Of

Miriam Fullah

Before

The

UNITED STATES CONGRESS HOUSE FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

SUB COMMITTEE

ON

GLOBAL HEALTH

AND GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS

19<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER, 2023

10:00 AM

**Chairman Smith, Ranking member Wild, and distinguished members of the committee, my name is Miriam Fullah and I thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today on this all-important subject of torturing and trafficking children for the purpose of ritualized murder and sacrifice.**

**I am here today as a first-hand witness and as a person who has been speaking out boldly against the torture and ill-treatment of children in Sierra Leone for over a decade. I directly worked with victims of trafficking, mostly children, as a counselor and presently as the Protection Manager for World Hope International in Sierra Leone. As the Protection Manager, I oversee the only specialized shelter for trafficking survivors, mostly females, in Sierra Leone. In February 2012, World Hope's anti-trafficking program opened the Trafficking in Persons Recovery Centre for survivors of human trafficking, with funding from The Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons at the U.S. Department of State. Still operational today, the center provides holistic and comprehensive aftercare to survivors with the ultimate goal of reintegrating them into a healthy Sierra Leonean society. The program intends to interrupt the violent exploitation cycle of human trafficking including sex and labor trafficking, as well as trafficking for the purpose of organ harvesting and ritual murder. The survivors we serve are human trafficking victims who were able to come out of the abuse alive. This is not so for those who lost their lives because another human being thinks they can only achieve their dreams for prosperity and healing by harvesting the body part of another human. This is also human trafficking and we've served some survivors of this type of exploitation at the centre.**

**In this part of the world where I live, the rights of people are often violated with impunity, but this happens more so to children who are considered personal property of their families. The protection of children is mostly left in the hands of parents or communities. The government has signed many treaties including the Child Rights Act but the government and people who are supposed to act or hold people accountable for such heinous crimes often only pay lip service to this all-important subject. I am testifying behind the screen today because I will be labeled as a person bringing a bad name to my country and knowing fully well what the consequences might be. I am willing to do this because families, mostly impoverished ones, are seeking answers and want justice for their loved ones. I want to be the voice of mothers, being one myself. If Sierra Leone is not safe for children, then mine are also not safe. This subject is a no-go area even for the so-called educated and enlightened. Families who have been affected are mostly impoverished and are left to grieve silently, if not for one human rights non-governmental organization making a loud noise about it. I am speaking out today because I am a mother and fear for the safety of my children.**

**Organ harvesting and child sacrifice in Sierra Leone are mostly linked to ritual murder. A child will be kidnapped from school or in their community and will be handed over to a**

native doctor who will typically take the child into deserted areas where they will be killed. They will mostly harvest organs like their private parts, breasts, tongues, and intestines. Children, especially girls, are mostly vulnerable because sometimes the native doctor will demand the blood of a virgin. This was exactly what happened in the story I am about to share.

Marie (not her real name) was only eight years old when she was brutally raped by her mother's boyfriend, whom she considered a father. He had built a huge house he wanted to rent out, but was particular about who the tenant should be. He wanted a rich individual or a big organization to rent the property. He waited for two years for his preferred tenants, but none showed up. He believed that this was due to bad luck. Desperate for answers, he sought out the help of a native doctor who told him that for him to attract such favors, he would need to shed the blood of a virgin. During his trial, which I attended to support Marie, this perpetrator testified in court that he wanted her to die but thought of the relationship he had with the mother. So, instead of having her killed, he raped her in this building until she was bleeding profusely. He was indeed able to spill the blood of a virgin, all in the name of attracting favors. Marie was lucky to be alive, but she still suffers emotionally up to today, years after the ritual abuse. Marie's mother recently suffered a stroke, which she believes to be a result of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, related to the abuse of her daughter. What this perpetrator did was not only a heinous crime, but it is forbidden culturally since a man is not supposed to have sexual intimacy with both a mother and her child.

Marie was able to get justice because an organization like World Hope International was supporting this family through the process of getting justice, taking her to multiple court sessions and helping to expose the bribes that the perpetrator offered the mother, if she would drop the case against him. Choosing justice over material possessions, she persisted in her quest for justice, and I was glad to be by her side for the duration. The perpetrator was ultimately sentenced to 15 years in prison. However, this is not the case for many others. It is for these "others" that I stand here today.

The issue of child sacrifice and organ harvesting is so shrouded in secrecy that getting data on this all-important issue is challenging. Data generally in Sierra Leone is challenging to obtain, but even more so for this issue. Ritual murders are mostly prosecuted in court under murder generally but not in relation to it being a ritual, so it is hard to get data indicating the extent of the crime.

People are more vigilant to these types of crimes when events like national and chieftaincy elections are approaching. This fear is legitimate because people running for election will go to great lengths, including paying for rituals, to gain favorable election outcomes. During these election seasons, even school authorities put in measures to help protect children. For example, they would like a particular person to pick up the child and present the child's identification card before the child can be picked up from school. If they have concerns, they will not allow for the child to be picked up except by the designated person. People are mostly afraid to speak out because it is believed and mostly the case that crimes like these

are committed by the rich and powerful, mostly politicians or by people with strong political affiliations. Families, especially those who have lost loved ones to this crime, are not willing to pursue justice because for them going through the long and delayed court process will not be beneficial. In part, it's not seen as beneficial because after the expense and time spent, even if they do get a conviction, they can no longer get what they really want; their loved one back with them.

It is for all these reasons that I was willing to travel thousands of miles (for the first time in my 46 years of life) to speak the truth for those who care to listen, hoping that it will not fall on deaf ears. Even if taking the necessary steps will save one child, it will have made it worth it. Let's put aside all bureaucracies and our hidden agendas to fight this heinous crime.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Miriam Fullah". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Miriam Fullah

19th September 2023