

Efforts to address ritual abuse and sacrifice in Africa

*Excerpts of remarks by Chairman Chris Smith (R-NJ)
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This hearing of the Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations will come to order.

Today we will examine the horrific crimes of ritual abuse and sacrifice and discuss what the United States and the international community must do to expose and combat this extreme violence.

These horrific crimes are at times trivialized or falsely portrayed as myth, rumors, or misinformation—but they are very real.

Our distinguished witnesses today bear witness to the unthinkable physical and psychological agony committed against innocent victims by witch doctors and human traffickers.

Crimes of ritual abuse and sacrifice involve mutilating, and usually murdering, victims to remove certain body parts, bodily fluids, or organs for use in sadistic rituals. These rituals are commonly ordered by people who believe that conducting these horrible acts will somehow bring them wealth, health, or other good fortune. Much of this abuse happens while the victim is still alive—and without anesthesia—and many die afterwards from shock, pain, or blood loss.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, we know that these crimes are especially prevalent around election seasons, when many children and adults go missing never to be

found—or to be found dead with body parts missing. This is because, to this day, some politicians use such rituals to gain power.

Tragically, children and women are especially vulnerable to this abuse and are particularly sought after by perpetrators.

Many rituals abuse or sacrifice innocent children.

Albino people—particularly albino children—are at very high risk for being kidnapped, trafficked, and abused for the sake of certain rituals. In Africa, it is estimated that hundreds of thousands of children each year are victims of ritual attacks in some form.

It is absolutely unacceptable that these crimes continue to occur, affecting so many vulnerable children and robbing them of their futures. And it is deeply disturbing that cases continue to be underreported and inadequately addressed by law enforcement.

Furthermore, ritual abuse and sacrifice is an especially pernicious form of human trafficking that often involves trafficking of organs. Last Thursday I chaired a hearing specifically focused on child trafficking, and we heard from one of the witnesses—Jeanne Celestine Lakin—a survivor of both the Rwandan genocide and child sex trafficking, that organ trafficking is especially prevalent in the trafficking of children, but it is often overlooked.

Organ trafficking for use in rituals is a worldwide phenomenon—traffickers even go so far as to set up warehouses to sell human flesh. We must do more in our anti-trafficking efforts to specifically address these heinous crimes.

While we need to better understand what can and must be done to end this egregious crime, this past March, the House voted 413 to 2 to approve legislation I authored [H.R. 1154—the Stop Forced Organ Harvesting Act of 2023](#). The bill—also cosponsored by Chairman McCaul, Kathy Manning, Bill Keating, Delegate Radewagon, French Hill and others—does the following:

- Amends the *Foreign Assistance Act of 1961* to require reports on forced organ harvesting and trafficking in persons for purposes of the removal of organs in foreign countries;
- The imposition of serious sanctions on any person the President determines funds, sponsors or otherwise facilitates forced organ harvesting or trafficking in persons for purposes of the removal of organs;
- Civil penalties include a fine of up to \$250,000; and
- Criminal penalties include a fine of up to \$1 million dollars and imprisonment for not more than 20 years, or both.
- Sanctions also include blocking and prohibiting all transactions in property and interests in property and making such persons inadmissible to the United States and ineligible to receive a visa.

I want to thank our very impressive witnesses for joining us today to discuss how we can do more to bring an end to ritual abuse and sacrifice.

We are very thankful to have Dr. Alan White, an expert on how and why these crimes are occurring, especially in Western Africa.

Dr. White served as the Founding Chief of Investigations of the United Nations backed Special Court for Sierra Leone, and his experiences in Sierra Leone and Liberia have allowed him to bring important attention to atrocity crimes and hold perpetrators accountable.

I have always considered it essential to listen to the voices of survivors when considering how to respond to abuses like the ones we will discuss today. I understand that we have at least one survivor of ritual abuse here in the audience, and I would like to thank her for being here and note that we admire her strength, courage, and resilience.

Two of our witnesses, Ms. Fullah and Mr. Byamugisha, have worked directly with survivors, even brought some to safety, and some even died in their arms. I would like to personally thank them for being here to share their testimonies from these firsthand experiences.