

Parliamentary Select Committee pledges to champion new Anti-Witchcraft Bill

From Mohammed Fugu, TAMALE

THE Parliamentary Select Committee on Human Rights has pledged to work hard to ensure the passage of a new Anti-Witchcraft Bill aimed at criminalising witchcraft accusations and protecting vulnerable individuals, especially elderly women.

It said accusations of witchcraft were a clear violation of fundamental human rights and an affront to human dignity; hence, Parliament had a constitutional responsibility to address these violations once and for all.

The Chairman of the Committee, Ernest Yaw Anim, indicated that such harmful practices have, for far too long, condemned vulnerable women, mostly elderly and widowed, to isolation, abuse,

and inhumane conditions in 'so-called' witch camps.

Mr Anim was speaking at a stakeholder meeting to climax a three-day tour of alleged witch camps in Tamale in the Northern Region.

The event organised by a consortium of non-governmental organisations, including Songtaba, Amnesty International Ghana, Oxfam Ghana, ActionAid, and the Sanneh Institute, the event sought to galvanise stakeholders, strengthen advocacy efforts, and build momentum towards the swift passage of a new Anti-Witchcraft Bill, while also pressing for improved protection and dignity for women who continue to live in the camps.

Anti-Witchcraft Bill

The previous attempt to legislate

against such harmful practices was made in the Eighth Parliament, which passed the Anti-Witchcraft Bill on July 28, 2023, three years after the shocking lynching of 90-year-old Akua Denteh in Kafaba in the Savannah Region.

However, the Bill never became law, as then-President, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, declined to assent to it, citing the financial burden it could impose on the Consolidated Fund.

Consequently, the legislation lapsed with the expiration of the Eighth Parliament.

Efforts

The Chairman of the Committee said Parliament would not relent on its efforts in pushing the new Bill through.

He said that the committee had seen first-hand the "harsh realities" faced by women confined to the camps and

stressed the urgency of a legal framework to outlaw witchcraft accusations.

He added that the committee would engage the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection to extend the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) intervention to cover all inmates at the various camps, as well as

provide them with other social amenities.

Care homes

The Greater Accra Regional Minister, Linda Akweley Ocloo, also speaking at the function, expressed concern over the "deplorable" conditions in which the women live.

She suggested that some of the camps could be transformed into adult-care homes, similar to models in Europe, stressing that many of the women were too old or vulnerable to reintegrate into their original communities.

She also called for a sustained sensitisation campaign in schools and communities to disabuse the minds of younger generations of the myths and stigma surrounding witchcraft accusations.

Attacks

The Northern Regional Programme Manager of ActionAid Ghana, Beatrice Biije, said the repeated attacks on vulnerable women and the continued existence of witch camps served as a stark reminder that justice remained elusive for far too many Ghanaians.

She lamented that the failure to assent to the earlier Bill had left survivors of witchcraft accusations vulnerable to abuse, while also leaving advocates and human rights defenders in a state of uncertainty.

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• Members of the committee with participants in the event