Fire And Brimstone

July 1, 2000

Some vulnerable Ugandan believers plagued as deeply by the toll of AIDS as by their country's civil unrest met a harrowing and fiery end in the town of Kanungu when most of a cult's members burned to death in their church. And while the international media played up the gruesome details of the Jonestown-esque drama, little ink was spilled over reports that cult leaders had preached of HIV as a divine punishment.

Ugandan police estimate that some 1,000 followers of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God were killed by the group's leaders, who were still on the run as POZ went to press. In addition to the more than 500 charred bodies found on March 17 at the group's church in the town of Kanungu, at least another 500 who had been shot or stabbed were found in nearby mass graves over thefollowing weeks.

Restoration leaders had espoused their belief that the world would end on the last day of the millennium, and followers had sold off all their belongings and handed over much of their money in exchange for eternal life, Ugandan authorities believe. When the new year came and went sans apocalypse, leaders revised their doomsday estimate to 2001, leaving many believers alienated and angry.

According to J. Gordon Melton, PhD, director of the California-based Institute for the Study of American Religion, the group's doctrine preached sexual abstinence and the belief that AIDS was punishment for violations of the sexual code in the Ten Commandments. "There is a direct reference to AIDS being a product of adultery," Melton told POZ. And because nearly 10 percent of Ugandans are estimated to have HIV, it's likely that many massacre victims were infected.

Melton, who is compiling a directory of emerging religious movements worldwide, noted that especially in the parts of Africa hardest hit by AIDS, new church leaders have made the disease part of their doctrine. "It is widely believed that AIDS has a significant effect on the membership of these groups," he said, but of the estimated 5,000 new sects worldwide, only a minority are believed to be violent cults.

The devastation of AIDS is likely to inspire more desperate acts and charismatic leaders in the developing world. Ugandan priestess Alice Lanwena was exiled to Kenya in 1987 after a failed attempt to turn her followers into rebel fighters, who she said would be protected from bullets by a magic oil. Lanwena now claims to have found the right blend of herbs to cure AIDS and has asked to return to Uganda, but the government has so far refused her request.

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