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## \ "SHAME ..... NEW VISION"

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Kyeyo seekers fluke Toronto conference

TALKING POINT: Some of participants at the AIDS conference.

SEVERAL of the Ugandan participants at the recent 16th International AIDS conference in Toronto were not genuine, but seeking kyeyo (odd job) opportunities. Sheila Kulubya, who attended the conference, gives the inside story.

Just days after arriving in Canada, Emmanuel Ndyanabo, a 22-year-old gay man, applied for refugee status for fear of being persecuted if he returned to Uganda.

Ndyanabo said he had been threatened by a customs official at Entebbe Airport while on his way to Toronto to attend the 16th International AIDS Conference. "He (still) stamped my passport, looked at me and said, 'I wish you luck. But do not come back if they (security) let you through,'" he told a Canadian daily newspaper The Globe and Mail.

Ndyanabo is not the only Ugandan who will not be returning home after the International AIDS Conference — the largest gathering of AIDS activists, experts, workers and government officials held every two years.

Many more Ugandan participants are planning to remain in Canada in search of greener pastures. Sunday Vision went undercover at the conference and discovered that almost half of the Ugandan participants attended the conference under false pretences.

For many, the conference was a perfect opportunity to sneak in to Canada to do kyeyo. Most immigrants end up doing lowly paying jobs.

A few, like Ndyanabo, managed to find their way to Canada through bursary schemes provided by some of the conference sponsors, but the majority travelled to the conference masquerading as representatives of respectable civil society groups, government employees and from faith-based organisations.

An NGO based in eastern Uganda, whose director is married to a Canadian national, is reported to have ferried more than 20 people to participate in various conference activities but who ultimately remained in Canada once the conference ended.

Josephine, a single mother of three in her mid 30s said she could barely survive on her sh150,000 salary as a primary school teacher in Iganga. The conference, she said, was the chance of a lifetime to find a better paying job and provide for her children.

For Ben, a 28-year-old Bachelor of Arts graduate, attending the conference was his ticket out of unemployment after spending two years searching for a job without success.

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Aida, a housewife in her early 30s, used the conference to bail out of a failed eight-year marriage that turned sour after her husband took a second wife. "This is an opportunity for me to forget about him and start a new life," she said.

Information gleaned from the trio as well as several of their colleagues indicate that they started preparing for the journey to Canada four months before the conference after getting word from the director of the NGO. It is said the director even helped some of the fake participants to fill in the visa applications.

What remains unclear is whether the AIDS conference was a one-off or the NGO has been a conduit for smuggling Ugandans into developed countries.

Further investigations by Sunday Vision revealed that most of the members in the group are relatives of the director, some are friends while others work with him in the NGO. Each of the travellers, however, was required to raise money for their airfare, but with the understanding that in future they would give some token of appreciation to the NGO owner once they settled in Canada.

There was panic, however, when some of the fake participants missed their connecting flight from Amsterdam to Toronto after they took a nap at the airport and overslept only to wake up to find the plane had already left for Canada.

Sunday Vision established from sources that Dutch airport officials had decided to send the whole bunch home, as the conference by then only had two days to go, but the NGO boss successfully secured their transfer to other flights claiming that they were required to perform at the closing ceremony.

"He told them they were coming specifically to perform at the closing ceremony, so it didn't matter that they were late," said one.

One man who arrived late one evening had to walk all the way to Toronto's Metro Convention Centre, where the conference was taking place — about 25 minutes' drive from the airport — because he had less than \$10 with him and could not afford to pay for a cab. It costs between \$30 to \$40 Canadian dollars to travel by cab from Toronto International Airport to the city centre.

A Canadian woman married to a Ugandan was heard complaining that she had been forced to provide temporary accommodation for some of the fake conference participants who had missed their flights, as most of the hotels in Toronto had been fully booked. The majority, however, had arranged to stay with friends and family and then relocate elsewhere after the conference or apply for refugee status.

It was clear that like Ndyanabo, most of the fake conference participants were planning to claim that they were being persecuted back home for being gay.

Sunday Vision was present in one of the private coaching sessions where a Ugandan immigrant in his mid 30s gave participants some tips on what to expect from the immigration officers, what to say when asked certain questions and how to avoid contradicting oneself during an interview.

One woman, who had left a husband and two children back in Uganda, was coached to say that she had been repeatedly beaten by her husband after he discovered that she was a lesbian. "You tell them that he became so violent

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you had no choice, but to abandon the marriage. And if they ask you why you did not leave and seek help amongst your relatives, you tell them that you were scared because he had threatened to go to the Police and tell them that you were a lesbian,” counselled the coach.

Sunday Vision was told that many Ugandans have been awarded Canadian refugee status after citing homosexuality and insecurity caused by the Lord's Resistance Army in the north.

“Once you say you are a homosexual or from northern Uganda, then it's a sure deal,” assured the coach. Similarly, the increased media coverage of the northern conflict as well as sexual discrimination has also opened more windows of opportunity. In October last year, for instance, the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) blacklisted Uganda as one of the countries that persecute gays.

The gay rights body stated, “Uganda is engaged in an active campaign of legislative overkill and coercion to silence an emerging community.... (gay) people live in fear because of aggressive government intimidation.”

In Uganda, homosexuality is illegal and is punishable by life imprisonment. However, court records show that no one has been given such a sentence.

Many fake participants in Toronto were excited by Ndyababo's touching but wildly exaggerated story in The Globe and Mail, saying it was bound to make it much more easier for them to apply for refugee status without much hassle.

“How can they accuse me of lying when it's all in the papers, “ asked Josephine excitedly.

The Canadian daily also gave prominence to an article in The Red Pepper, published on August 8 listing names of 45 alleged homosexuals, whom the paper characterised as “men who like to give it to other men from behind.”

According to The Globe and Mail, “The Ugandan tabloid denounced homosexuality as ‘an abominable sin, in fact a mortal sin that's against nature,’ and said it wanted to “demonstrate how rapidly this terrible vice known as sodomy is eating away at our society.”

By the time this writer left Toronto, it could not be readily established whether Canadian officials had discovered the racket or whether they had put in place special measures to ensure that participants returned to their native countries.

Some government officials, however, were worried that if Ugandan participants remained behind, it might set a bad precedent for future conferences with host countries imposing stringent requirements for participants from countries whose citizens are notorious for not returning home.

“Such things give our country a bad reputation. And in future, we might find it difficult to secure visas to attend some of these conferences,” noted Dr. Sam Zaramba, the Director General of Health Services, who also headed the Ministry of Health's delegation to the conference.

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