

23 dead in initiation rites in South Africa

May 17 2013, by Wandoo Makurdi



In this July 7, 2006 file photo an unidentified initiate, with his face caked in white lime clay, eats rice from his blanket during his rite of transformation from a boy to manhood near Port St. John's, South Africa. South African police say 23 youths have died over a period of nine days at initiation ceremonies that include circumcisions and survival tests. (AP Photo/Obed Zilwa-file)

(AP)—Twenty-three youths have died in the past nine days at initiation ceremonies that include circumcisions and survival tests, South African police said Friday.

Police have opened 22 murder cases in the deaths in the northeastern province of Mpumalanga, according to spokesman Lt. Col. Leonard Hlathi. He said an inquest is being held into the 23rd death, of a youth who complained of stomach pains and vomited.

Initiation ceremonies are common in South Africa, where youths partake in various activities as a rite of passage into adulthood, usually over the course of three weeks. Some 30,000 youths signed up for initiation this year.

In addition to being circumcised, the boys and young men are put through a series of survival tests which sometimes include exposure to South Africa's chilly winter conditions with skimpy clothing. Their faces are painted with red clay and they also are given herbal concoctions to drink.



In this Sunday, Dec. 16, 2012 file photo Bambatha Mandela, grandson of former president Nelson Mandela, takes part in an initiation ceremony in Qunu, South Africa in a traditional Xhosa rite of passage to manhood. South African police say 23 youths have died over a period of nine days at initiation ceremonies that include circumcisions and survival tests. (AP Photo, File)

Nelson Mandela, the first democratically elected president of South Africa, described the experience in his autobiography as "a kind of spiritual preparation for the trials of manhood."

Hlathi said that all the deaths occurred at government-registered initiation sites where medical practitioners usually are present. The government became involved to prevent such unnecessary deaths.

Mathibela Mokoena, chairman of the House of Traditional Leaders in Mpumalanga, says the Department of Health was alerted before the initiation ceremonies began, but only showed up after the first few deaths were reported. He said the department has now agreed to have officials present for the remainder of the ceremony.

Popo Maja, head of communications at the Health Department, said: "We would want to find out why they were done without the supervision of medical personnel.

The deaths are the highest recorded in Mpumalanga, surpassing the previous highest toll of eight some years ago, Mokoena said. He said early investigation by the House of Traditional Leaders showed some schools were negligent, leaving the youths in the care of young men instead of experienced adults.

Mokoena said some of the initiates were not in ideal health when they enrolled. He said new legislation is being introduced outlining procedures to be followed, and including a punishment of a life ban for those found negligent.

The suspected causes of the deaths were not released pending the results of post-mortems. Most deaths in the past have been caused by infection and loss of blood after circumcision.

Government spokeswoman Phumla Williams said the government is sending condolences to the families and urged creation of "better and safe initiation schools that will ensure the safe passage of young initiates to manhood and prevent the unfortunate loss of lives."

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