

Net closes in on illegal initiation schools

Traditional Affairs Deputy Minister Obed Bapela has slammed illegal initiation schools that coerce and kidnap young children.



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The Deputy Minister visited the Eastern Cape on Tuesday and Wednesday to get a first-hand account of the situation on the ground.

Winter and summer are the prime initiation seasons in South Africa. While the age-old tradition is honoured among the cultural groups who practise it, unscrupulous individuals have taken the gap by setting up illegal schools where many young men have been maimed with life-long effects. Each year, scores of boys hoping to transition into manhood lose their lives at these suspect schools, where the owners, who are often unregistered, are looking to make a quick buck.

“These syndicates have no respect for our culture and the life of black South Africans. We are saddened by the senseless increase of young men who lose their precious lives while undergoing this important cultural practice.

“We have currently lost 22 precious young lives since the beginning of the winter initiation season and the Eastern Cape remains our main concern,” said Deputy Minister Bapela.

The Deputy Minister’s visit is part of the winter initiation season monitoring outreach programme. He visited St Barnabas Hospital in Libode and Canzibe Hospital in Engqeleni, where some rescued initiates are being treated.

The rescued initiates the Deputy Minister met sustained various degrees of injuries as a result of botched circumcision. Some of them had also been assaulted and dehydrated, while others were not screened before going to initiation school. There was generally a lack of proper aftercare for the initiates.

The Deputy Minister was also informed by the traditional leaders in the Eastern Cape that a syndicate leader, popularly known as Mchayina, was arrested by the police but released due to lack of evidence. The families of initiates refuse to come forward or even work with the police to bring him to book.

“We are saddened that young men still continue to die, even with increased efforts by government to sensitise communities about the need to ensure that before they release their children to attend initiation schools, all key processes are followed

outlined by the department,” said the Department of Traditional Affairs.

Law gets tough on illegal schools

According to the department, about 16 initiates died in the Eastern Cape. Two died in Limpopo, one in the North West, two in Mpumalanga, and one in Gauteng.

“The Deputy Minister indicated that Parliament will before the end of the year pass the law to criminalise operations of illegal schools and this will carry a minimum sentence of not more than five years.

“This law will send a strong message and ensure that these cruel heartless criminals and syndicates go to jail for a long time,” said the department.

The Deputy Minister also visited a family whose son died because of severe dehydration.

“Once again, the Deputy Minister lamented this myth and urged parents to ensure that their children drink lots of water ahead of and during initiation.

“The Deputy Minister continues to urge communities to report illegal initiation schools through this hotline number - 0800 1 166 or #InitiationDTA,” said the department.

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