

Six years without Sophia

Today, Thursday, October 28, 2021 is an unremarkable day for most readers. For my husband and sons, this date confronts us mercilessly with the harsh and naked fact that we have now lived six years without Sophia, our firstborn child, only daughter and sister.

Sophia, bright and ambitious, a doctor to be, came to Uganda late August 2015 to work at Lubaga Hospital as a medical intern.

She did very well there as local fellow workers told me. A midwife who worked with her often at the maternity ward, told me: "Sophia is a born doctor."

After finishing her internship, she went on a trip around Uganda. On the sixth day of her trip she disappeared, under unclear circumstances in Murchison National Park. She and her travel companions had just arrived at the Student Centre in Paraa, a very low budget accommodation, owned and run by Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA). A place not really fit for tourists, there were no security guards as in regular lodges. Her fellow travellers, including their guide, were aware that Sophia was not well. He should never have taken her there.

The ultimate nightmare for every parent started for us on October 28, 2015: your child disappears and you have no clue what happened. We are still hoping we will wake up from this terrible nightmare one day and pick up our lives again. But we do not know if that day will come, or when.

We do know that a really thorough investigation did not take place as has been clearly seen and wholeheartedly acknowledged by a number of prominent authorities in Uganda.

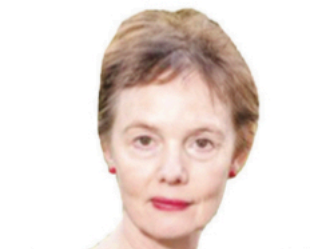
When arriving at the scene, a full day later, I vividly recall having a strong and strange feeling; of something being really wrong and that there might be people who know more.

After about a week investigations were halted and it was left at 'fatal accident' although evidence pointing that way, has never been found. Sophia seems to have disappeared into thin air.

The story vanished quickly and to this day I meet lots of people who have never heard of Sophia's mysterious disappearance in Murchison Falls National Park, including people in UWA management.



Sophia



MARIJE SLIJKERMAN

In 2019, a fresh investigation was called for by the Directorate of Public Prosecutions, not ruling out anything,

including a crime. This investigation really took off after I spoke with President Yoweri Museveni, who showed serious concern. Unfortunately, shortly after, setbacks occurred; the pandemic, ensuing lockdowns, elections taking security forces' attention elsewhere. And this year a lot of transfers within the Police. The supervision of the investigation changed four times in nine months, which doesn't help continuity.

My first trip to Uganda was filled with eagerness to get acquainted with an unknown country, but most of all, to see my daughter in a white coat, working in a Kampala hospital. Two weeks after my arrival, the trip turned into an unforeseen and unimaginable nightmare. I left Uganda a broken mother.

The next 16 trips I have made to Uganda have been hard, taking a toll on our lives in many aspects; mentally, physically and also financially.

Friends tell me that I have been running on an empty battery for all these years.

They could very well be right, but this is not a choice, it is a deeply felt inner drive. Giving up would mean deserting Sophia, which for me is impossible to do.

On these journeys to Uganda, I have met many, many people. Our story is often new to them. They show shock, concern and offer help, but eventually lose interest and communications cease.

Then there are the people who do remain committed and stay involved in this ongoing search for Sophia. They may not realise how much their continuous support helps and how it makes these trips, time and time again, a little less difficult. The trips to the country that has taken our girl away from us and thus far won't reveal where she is.

It goes without saying that whoever manages to find out what really happened to Sophia, and is able to produce convincing evidence, will be generously rewarded.

We miss her so very, very much.

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