

Sophia Koetsier.
PHOTO/COURTESY.



Seven years without Sophia

Adventure gone wrong?

Sophia Koetsier had a knack for adventure. After her internship at Lubaga Hospital she travelled around Uganda as she planned to return to her home country. On October 28, 2015, Sophia went missing in Murchison Falls National Park and has since never been found. **Marije Slijkerman**, her mother shares what it is like.

October 28 has just passed. The day that keeps coming back to tell us, without any mercy, that yet another year has passed since our lovely and so deeply missed Sophia disappeared in Uganda. Seven years ago.

Years that have been difficult, filled with pain and a whole spectrum of emotions. Wondering every day where Sophia is, is she alive, what happened to her? And will we ever find out? Ordinary things that remind us of her presence, such as her bicycle parked in front of the house. The tyres have barely lost pressure, as if that bicycle is waiting for her, just as we are.

Will that day ever come, the day that Sophia is found and returns home, so the dark memory of that October 28 slowly fades away? Or will next year's October 28 have the same grim message, that yet another year has passed? Do we have a lifelong sentence of being torn apart

by insecurity and fear about Sophia's fate?

The beginning

Sophia, 21, doctor-to-be, came to Uganda at the end of August 2015. She had just acquired her Bachelor of Medicine and was going to work for eight weeks as an intern at Lubaga Hospital in Kampala. She enjoyed her stay and work immensely, as was clear from the lengthy weekly reports she sent us.

Off to adventure, then...

After finishing the internship she went on a trip through the country, before going home. On the sixth day of this trip she disappeared, in Murchison Falls National Park. The circumstances are unclear, a proper investigation did not take place at the time. Instead, authorities, in Uganda and The Netherlands, conveniently assumed 'fatal accident' although there was no evidence to back this up.

Due to lack of any evidence and doubt about the thoroughness of the investigation, we have not been able to accept this and we strongly believe that other scenarios are possible. The sense that there are people who know more was there from the start and it has never left us. We are not alone in that thought. If only we knew who those in the know are.

I often say that I came to Uganda voluntarily only once. I wanted to see my daughter in a white coat, working in a hospital there and travel a bit myself in a country which was then completely unknown to me.

I spent two interesting weeks in Uganda and frequently saw Sophia. Then, the unthinkable happened and I had to go home

QUICK NOTES

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Thus far I have made 19 trips to Uganda since that first one, not because I want to, but because I have to. To do all I can to find Sophia.

The hope of finding our beautiful girl remains. As I heard someone say the other day: 'Never rule out the unbelievable'. To which I would like to add: 'Nothing is sure, everything is possible'.

alone, a broken mother. But one who eventually pulled herself together and is determined not to give up on her child. Thus far I have made 19 trips to Uganda since that first one, not because I want to, but because I have to. To do all I can to find Sophia.

The authorities

Ugandan authorities have acknowledged that a serious investigation did not take place at the time. Earlier this year the former Director Criminal Investigation Directorate (CID), Grace Akullo, named three high priority cases in a televised speech, when transferring duties to her successor. One of them was Sophia's disappearance from the Student Centre at Paraa in Murchison Falls National Park.

As reported recently in the Ugandan media, the current Director CID, Tom Magambo, has assembled a team to reinvestigate the mysterious disappearance of Sophia. This gives us hope that one day we might no longer be lost in a jungle of question marks about what happened to Sophia. And most of all, that she is found.

The pain

To be frank, it is not easy to keep going, but giving up is most definitely not an option. Doing nothing usually leads to nowhere and if all I can do is make sure that Sophia is not forgotten, then that is what I must do.

Dutch Public Television has made a 40-minute film about Sophia and her mysterious disappearance in Uganda. It was not easy to do, for any of the people involved, but we thought it very important that people can see who Sophia is. Also, that it is a mystery indeed and that it is far too simple to be cast aside as 'fatal accident'. As Gerard, Sophia's father, says: "There are too many pieces missing. And that is not all. The

pieces just do not fit".

Judging by the many reactions we received after the broadcast on Dutch television, the film has succeeded in this goal. One reaction ended with: "Everyone, including viewers who did not know anything about this, will understand why you will keep fighting for this wonderful daughter and sister".

Another one said: "Heartbreaking documentary about the disappearance of my former classmate Sophia Koetsier. I remember Sophia as an, especially inquisitive, independent and vivacious person who marched to the beat of her own drum".

We have managed to have an English subtitled version made of this television portrait. There is much interest in the story outside The Netherlands, not only in Uganda but in other countries as well. We want it to spread as far and wide as possible, so English subtitles are indispensable.

A link can be found on: www.find-sophia.org

The future

I shall be returning soon to the country that took our girl away from us and has, to this day, not revealed where she is. These journeys are tough and I always have to gather strength and courage to board that plane to Entebbe again. It is made a little less hard by several people I have met there in the course of these seven years and who I may call friends.

On these journeys I always carry Sophia's now expired passport with me and a small bag with some clothing for her. Just in case.

The hope of finding our beautiful girl remains. As I heard someone say the other day: 'Never rule out the unbelievable'.

To which I would like to add: 'Nothing is sure, everything is possible'.