

# National News

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# The day the sky fell: When our Sophia went missing

Sophia's family believe she is still alive.

BY MARIJE SLIJKERMAN

On a Wednesday evening, in 2015, our beautiful daughter Sophia Koetsier disappeared in Murchison Falls National Park. She had just acquired her Bachelor of Medicine and came to Uganda to work as an intern at Lubaga Hospital in Kampala.

After completing that eight-week internship, she went on a trip around the country with two Dutch students and a Ugandan tour guide, who was also their driver. The trip was to last 17 days. On day six, she vanished. The calendar read: October 28, 2015.

To this day, her disappearance remains a mystery that has dominated our lives ever since. In my unrelenting search for Sophia, for answers, I have thus far made 28 journeys to Uganda, always hoping that the many questions we have will be answered one day, when asked by the right people.

On July 7, I testified at Buganda Road Court in the case that prosecution opened against Sophia's tour guide. A police investigation into Sophia's disappearance found that he was not licensed to work as a tour guide when he took Sophia and companions on that trip. We were not aware of that. This newspaper has reported on all court hearings in this case. In both the first and the second hearing, a witness was heard, who worked at Kidepo National Park, when Sophia spent one night there. According to the newspaper accounts, she is being depicted as a crazy girl. This is painful to read for us who know her so well. It is hard to tell how accurate these testimonies are.

## 'Very vulnerable'

A few years ago, I received an email from an English woman. She wrote that she was in Kidepo with her family that same night. She confirmed they were woken up by noise and she and her husband went out to investigate. They found Sophia on the viewing platform and interacted with her.

The woman described her as 'responsive, apologetic for making noise, polite and very articulate' but at the same time

Sophia struck her as very vulnerable. She and her husband expressed their concerns about her wellbeing to both the warden and the tour guide in the morning. They were not sure how seriously they were taken.

The first time I heard about the tour guide being warned not to travel further with Sophia was in June 2016. With one of my sons, I tracked Sophia's journey from Kampala to Murchison. We also spent one night at Kidepo, where I spoke with Mr Nyadru, the warden, who then told me about the advice he had given to the tour guide. I had come to visit Sophia in Uganda. The last time I saw her was one week before her disappearance, on October 21, 2015. We had dinner together and would normally see each other again at home in November. I did not notice anything unusual about my daughter. She was vividly telling me about her work at the hospital and said if they asked her to stay for another two months, she would say 'yes'.

The last time I spoke with her was on the phone, in the afternoon of the pitch-black day that changed our lives. She sounded fine, told me she was on a boat and very much enjoying the trip. Not until 6.30pm, when called by one of the travel companions, did I hear about Sophia not being well. I was told they worried about her and wanted to return to Kampala the next day. Some two hours later, I heard she was missing.

## Grave mistake

It is very hard for us to understand why the tour guide took them to the Student Centre that last night. He was clearly aware that Sophia was not well, the companions told him around 6pm that afternoon they worried about her, and that they had to return to Kampala. The prior night, instead of going to Kitgum, the tour guide had decided to take them to Gulu, a more resourceful place, as he later said. If he was heeding the advice he had received at Kidepo that morning, why take Sophia the next day to the 'least resourceful place one can think of? Very cheap but unfit for tourists as there was no security. He could have gone to another more resourceful place, Masindi for example. Instead, he created a situa-



Sophia Koetsier at work in Lubaga Hospital in 2015. PHOTO/COURTESY

tion that maximised the chance for accidents to happen.

## Far from crazy

As mentioned earlier, it pains us to see Sophia being described as a crazy girl and I feel the urge to explain her bipolar condition, which I believe is not well understood. Most bipolar individuals experience mood swings, but 10 to 15 per cent only become manic, never depressed.

Sophia belongs to that category, which in essence makes her unipolar. Only very occasionally does she experience a hypomanic or manic episode. They are short, few and far between, and she recovers

## APPEAL

Please reach out to the family if you have information. Please do not reach out if your only motive is to extort money from a desperate family. For more information, please visit: [www.findSophia.org](http://www.findSophia.org) and/or, contact@findSophia.

with good to very good grades.

When she left for Uganda, she was fine. Her colleagues in Lubaga Hospital were full of praise for her ability to learn fast and her willingness to help with anything, including mopping floors, if needed. On the second day of their journey, she told her two travel companions, also medical students, that she is bipolar. They later confessed to me that they were very surprised to hear that they had not noticed anything unusual in her.

Manic episodes occur when there are a lot of incentives and new experiences, and not enough rest to process everything. The latter was clearly the case in those eight weeks in Kampala, living in a very full and busy house and getting up early to go to work. As she wrote in one of her extensive weekly reports: 'It's fun to live in a student house, but it is never quiet.' And quiet is crucial for Sophia, who is far from crazy. She was ill when she disappeared and needed care.

What is also painful for us, and everyone who loves and misses her, are people who speak, or write, about Sophia in the past tense. As if she is no longer here. But until we have evidence to the contrary, for us she is alive.

## Hopeful

Our hope that Sophia is still alive may sound unrealistic to some people, but how realistic is one person to survive a plane crash that kills all 241 other passengers and crew on board? Yet, it happened last month in India. In reality, these things happen; people sometimes are found, after having been missing for many years.

Yes, we know we may never find Sophia. But doing nothing is not an option. We believe there is still work that has not been done and should be done by the right people. Shortly after Sophia's disappearance in Murchison Falls National Park, I stood at the bank of the River Nile, seeing the puzzling trail of items laid out there. A strong feeling that something was very wrong came over me. Those feelings have never faded. Of course, feelings are not facts; I am fully aware of that. Nevertheless, you can only find out if it's a dead end when you start walking.

Ms Slijkerman is Sophia's mother.

## BACKGROUND

Dutch medical intern Sophia Koetsier, then 21, arrived in Kampala on August 31, 2015, having just acquired her Bachelor of Medicine. Her ambition was to continue with Tropical Medicine and later become a surgeon or gynaecologist.

She went missing on October 28, 2015. The circumstances of her disappearance are still unclear.

fast. It has never set her back in school, study or work. She is an easy learner and passed all her medical exams in one go,

2015  
SOPHIA GOES  
MISSING