Eleven years on, Sophia is still missing

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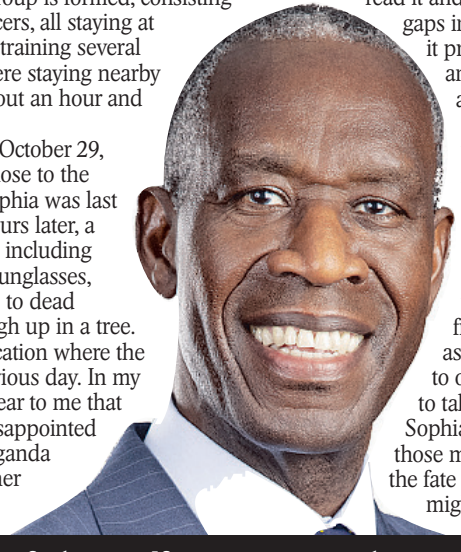
Dear President Yoweri Museveni, today is the 11th anniversary of the disappearance of Dutch medical student Sophia Koetsier, who went missing on October 28, 2015, in Murchison Falls National Park. Her mother, Marije Slijkerman, whom you have met several times in the past, agreed to collaborate with me to write this letter. I have learnt that life without Sophia has been very hard for her family over the past decade, lending urgency to their quest for information on what happened to her. Marije has generously provided details about her daughter that helped me gain a deeper and fuller picture of Sophia. The oldest child of three, and only daughter, Sophia proved to be a talented girl; bright student, gifted pianist and keen artistic abilities. Her love of exploring life was what drew Sophia to Uganda.

Upon arrival in Kampala, she was quickly smitten by the Ugandan culture and its people, especially the children. In her weekly reports to her family, an early entry read: 'On our first day, we immediately made friends with the local children'. She also writes extensively about her work as a medical intern at Rubaga Hospital. She gets along well with her Ugandan colleagues, especially in the maternity ward, and is very eager to learn new things and to be useful. The last entry in her diary, on October 22, reads: 'I sincerely regret my stay here is over. All the people in the hospital are so sweet. I will really miss them and hope to be back one day. Who knows, as a doctor of tropical medicine?' As you know, after finishing her internship, Sophia went on a trip through the country with two Dutch fellow interns and a Ugandan driver on October 23. When staying at Kidepo National Park, Sophia displayed symptoms of discomfort overnight. The driver was advised not to continue travelling with Sophia. However, her companions spoke with her and decided Sophia seemed better, so they continued the journey. That night, October 27, they stayed in Gulu, instead of Kitgum as originally planned. When asked, the driver said Gulu was a more resourceful place, in case Sophia would be unwell.

The next day, they proceeded to Murchison Falls National Park. On the boat ride to Murchison Falls, Sophia seems further withdrawn. The companions inform the driver that they can't travel on and should go back to Kampala the next morning. He takes them to the Student Centre in Paraa, a very cheap and basic accommodation owned and run by Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA), mainly used by UWA personnel.

Within an hour of arrival, around 6:00pm, Sophia goes missing. A small search group is formed, consisting of park rangers and UPDF officers, all staying at the Student Centre. They were training several hundred UWA recruits who were staying nearby in a camp. This search lasts about an hour and does not produce results.

The next morning, Thursday October 29, another search is held. Quite close to the riverbank, they find a bottle Sophia was last seen carrying. More that 24 hours later, a trail of puzzling items is found, including one very clean shoe, a pair of sunglasses, torn pieces of textile, some tied to dead wood and a pair of knickers high up in a tree. These items are close to the location where the bottle had been found the previous day. In my discussions with Marije, it is clear to me that she is deeply frustrated and disappointed with what has been done in Uganda to find out what happened to her daughter. According to her, the initial investigation left a great deal to be desired. She found it to be unco-ordinated, speaks of tunnel vision and blaming the victim. It was quickly assumed that Sophia must have been attacked by an animal even though nothing was found to point in that direction.



Despite limited resources, Marije has made numerous journeys to Uganda. She has gathered information, tracked down witnesses, wrote articles, done interviews and kept pressing for a new and thorough investigation. You met with Marije in January of 2020 and ordered a new investigation into Sophia's disappearance. Unfortunately, it was derailed quickly by the worldwide Covid pandemic and was never really concluded. A new investigation started in April 2022. Marije met with the CID director, shared information with him and was promised she would receive a report in three months. In October 2023, 18 months later, she received a report from the then State Minister of Internal Affairs. He mentioned to her that you had already read it and had found a number of gaps in it. Marije agreed, she found it produced more questions than answers, as she explained in a substantiated review of the report. This, she shared with the state minister, who sent it to the CID. A response never came. Unwilling to give up, she met with you again in November 2024. She handed you a copy of the review and expressed her frustration. You kindly offered assistance and introduced her to one of your staff members to talk matters through. It gave Sophia's family new hope that those much-needed answers about the fate of their beloved Sophia might be found. In April 2025, the staff member communicated to Marije that a new report had been submitted to you. Shortly after, this person left State House and Marije has not managed to locate that report.

After carefully reviewing the ample information shared by Marije, we agree questions remain. Among others, the more than 24-hour time gap between finding the bottle and finding the whole trail of items, despite both locations being so close to one another. Also, did the police compile a complete list of everyone at the Student Centre the night Sophia disappeared? If so, were they all properly interviewed to make a statement?

To my knowledge, some members of the UPDF who could provide useful information have not been thoroughly interviewed on what they remember about the evening. To answer these and other questions, after consulting with Marije, the following are my recommendations for next steps. I believe that a properly constituted commission of inquiry headed by a credible person with power to compel witnesses to come forward to provide information will go a long way towards finding what happened to Sophia. At the top of the list of highly respected Ugandans, both at home and internationally, is retired Chief Justice Alfonse Chigamoy Owiny-Dollo, whose deep understanding of the law and rich experience will guide such a commission. I also recommend ensuring that Marije is given the necessary support and allowed to assist and provide information in the investigation. This is the least my country can do to support a mother waiting for answers to what happened to her daughter.

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Marije Slijkerman is the mother of Sophia Koetsier

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