

## **Kenya; UK's Plan to Ban Khat Faulted**

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The Nation

Miraa traders, farmers and chewers have not welcomed the crop's intended ban in Britain.

The UK home office wants to stop the importation and chewing of miraa (khat) following a research conducted in Britain.

The research mainly targeted Somalis living in London, Bristol, Birmingham and Sheffield cities. It also targeted Ethiopians, Yemeni and Kenyans.

Now the Nyambene Miraa Traders Association (Nyamita) has warned that the ban might have far-reaching consequences detrimental even to the UK.

Nyamita chairman L.N. Baariu and secretary Mwenda Mitheka accuse the researchers of bias in targeting non-consumers in the survey.

They argued that the ban would automatically increase the demand for the crop, and so reintroduce it through the black market.

### **Worsen situation**

Mr Mitheka said the UK was being selfish and called for dialogue. "Let's build structures to manage the miraa industry in order to realise its full potential. Outright ban will worsen the situation," Mr Mwenda said.

He said it would be better to project miraa's image well, then moderate its use to avoid abuse. Those denied the product, he warned, would drift into alternative and more dangerous drugs.

The respected Meru Council of Elders, Njuri Ncheke, has also added their voice to the debate, terming the move ill-advised and meant to deny the people of Nyambene District their main source of livelihood.

Njuri Ncheke chairman Paul Inthingia, who outlawed the spraying of miraa, said the council had always ensured hygienic standards were observed from the time of planting to the time the twigs were delivered to the market.

He said those who went against the council's directive suffered, since their miraa trees were uprooted to ensure nobody else repeated the mistake.

He appealed to the UK to reconsider its stand and questioned the criteria used to arrive at their "one-sided" decision.

Nyamita was registered in 1975 to present farmers' interest to the Government and other interested organisations throughout the world.

Only the US and Canada have declared miraa illegal in their territories, but the amount of the commodity smuggled to US alone exceeds \$5 billion (Sh365 billion) annually.

Nyamita officials said the UK researchers did not have an all round knowledge of the chemistry of miraa, and concentrated on only a few ingredients.

Mr Mwenda noted that the research failed to capture several nutrients, vitamins and minerals in fresh miraa leaves like amino acid, calcium, protein and iron. Miraa provides natural protection against cancer, heart diseases and pellagra when taken at the required daily dosage, he said.

Its continuous use lowers the birth rate and averts depression due to its relaxing nature. It also minimises medical bills prescribed by doctors for family planing, he observed.

He cited family instability, economic strain and prolonged absence of husbands as the negative attributes of miraa chewers, which should be addressed.

Some of the elderly people interviewed said they had been chewing miraa since teenage and asked why UK now wanted to declare it illegal.

They said miraa was relaxing to the body and mind, and ensured sustained concentration without any ugly side effects like other drugs.

"Miraa suppresses sleep and fatigue in work situations requiring alertness and attention. Most security guards use it to stay awake at night", said Mr. Simon Kobia, adding that it also suppressed appetite and moderated euphoria.

"Offending incidents are very rare amongst miraa chewers," noted the Nyamita chairman.

According to available documents, the first authoritative miraa research was done by the World Health Organisation in 1994, while the second was carried in 1996 by the Kenya National Council of Science and Technology (NCST).

The NCST found that the production and chewing of miraa was bound to continue, due to its economic importance. They ruled that its side effects were minor compared to beer and tobacco, the two most abused and socially acceptable products the world over.

The researchers also stated that miraa was chewed in its natural state and in small quantities, unlike some drugs which required laboratory formulation before use.

### **Black market**

Last year, Prof Houghton of Kings College in London found that it would be too costly to ban miraa because it would become much more expensive than it is in the open market. This would inevitably introduce underworld cartels and black market operations, which he noted, are expensive and dangerous.

His colleague, Prof Lynn Fraser, discovered that miraa has ingredients that enhanced male virility, thus discarding the traditional belief that it made men sexually inactive.

Miraa farmers in Nyambene earn Sh18 million in exports per day, and the action could spell doom for the thousands who depend on it for their livelihood.

It is mandatory for a man to give miraa as bride price during marriage negotiations because it is believed to bless the womb.

Miraa is advisedly chewed with either milk or tea, and those who mix it with drugs like cocaine, mandrax and bhang are bound to be irresponsible.