Uganda to bury murdered Olympian Cheptegei

AFP – Uganda on Saturday will lay to rest Olympian Rebecca Cheptegei, who died earlier this month after her partner set her on fire in the latest incident of horrific gender-based violence in Kenya.

The 33-year-old, who debuted this summer in the women's marathon at the Paris Olympics, succumbed to severe burns last week after being attacked by Dickson Ndiema Marangach.

The brutal assault shocked the East African region and prompted a global outpouring of tributes, with activists condemning another act of gender-based violence.

Rain fell as the athlete's body crossed the Kenya-Uganda border late Friday afternoon ahead of the funeral in the family's village of Bukwo, some 380 kilometres (240 miles) northeast of Uganda's capital Kampala.

"We are extremely saddened," said her estranged husband Simon Ayeko, with whom she had two daughters.

"As a father it has been very difficult," he told AFP, explaining he had not been able to break the news to their children.

"Slowly we will tell them the truth."

Cheptegei, a sergeant in the Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces, will be buried starting around 10:00 am (0700 GMT) with military honours, Beatrice Ayikoru, Uganda's Olympics Committee secretary general and part of the burial organising committee, told AFP.

Scores of athletes have travelled to the small village to attend.

“She greatly contributed to the promotion of athletics until her last days,” coach Alex Malinga, who trained her as a teenager, told AFP.

– ‘Relationship soured’ –

Local media say Cheptegei’s daughters witnessed the attack. Police said Marangach snuck into her home while she was at church with her children.

Her family say the couple had argued over ownership of the property where she lived with her sister Dorcas Cherop and daughters.

Her attacker later died from injuries sustained in the assault.

“I think at that time, their relationship had become sour,” Cheptegei’s brother-in-law, Moses Kipsiro, told AFP.

“I didn’t know then something was wrong,” said Kipsiro, who previously trained with Cheptegei and also hails from Bukwo.

The vicious assault has thrown yet another spotlight on what activists have called a femicide epidemic.

Kenya reported 725 femicide cases in 2022 alone, according to the latest UN figures.

A report the following year by Kenya’s National Bureau of Statistics found 34 percent of women had experienced physical violence since the age of 15.

At least two other athletes, Agnes Tirop and Damaris Mutua, have lost their lives in domestic violence incidents since 2021.

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