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DR Congo: Ensure Credible Probe of Bodies Found in River

4 Bodies Found Following Political Demonstrations on July 9

(Kinshasa) – Authorities in the [Democratic Republic of Congo](#) should ensure an effective investigation into the apparent murder of four members of President Felix Tshisekedi’s political party.

The investigation should be thorough, independent, and impartial and pursue credible information that others are still missing, possibly victims of enforced disappearances. Investigators should also pursue information that the men found dead had been detained at a military-run facility in the southern city of Lubumbashi following a demonstration on July 9, 2020.

“The grim discovery of dumped bodies days after a political protest sends a chilling warning about the freedom of expression in Congo,” said [Thomas Fessy](#), senior Congo researcher at Human Rights Watch. “As [political tensions](#) currently run high, no lead should be overlooked, and the authorities should pursue justice wherever the investigation takes them.”

On July 8, members of former president Joseph Kabila’s People’s Party for Reconstruction and Democracy (PPRD) and Tshisekedi’s political party Union for Democracy and Social Progress (UDPS) – both part of the ruling coalition – [clashed](#) in the streets of Lubumbashi. On July 9, mass protests took place in several cities against the appointment of a new president for the electoral commission. Several sources have confirmed that at least 16 people were arrested and held in military detention following the demonstration in Lubumbashi.

On July 12, the body of Dodo Ntumba, 49, was found floating in the Lubumbashi river. On July 13, the bodies of Mardoché Matanda and Héritier Mpiana, both 18, were recovered from the river. On August 3, family members of Danny Kalambayi, 29, found his body at a morgue nearly a month after they last saw him. Witnesses told Human Rights Watch that all four bodies had traces of cuts and mutilation, which could be the result of torture. They were all members of Tshisekedi’s political party.

Human Rights Watch interviewed 39 family members of the victims, political party members, lawyers, activists, government officials, and medical, security, and judicial sources. Sources have confirmed that some demonstrators were held in military custody following the protest but the exact number and what happened to them remain unknown. The investigation should clarify whether the four men recently found dead were part of the group and if others are still unaccounted for and have been forcibly disappeared, Human Rights Watch said. It should also explain what legal power military forces were exercising when they detained the demonstrators.

These deaths occurred in a context of growing repression since the start of the year, which Human Rights Watch recently [documented](#). Political tensions and insecurity have also been mounting in the Haut-Katanga province, where civil society groups have repeatedly [raised their concerns](#) in recent months. Many of the political rifts fall along ethnic lines [reigniting tensions](#) between native Katangans and immigrants, and their descendants, from the Kasai region.

Haut-Katanga is the PPRD’s historic stronghold while the UDPS heartlands are in the neighboring Kasai region. Several people were injured in the scuffles on July 8, according to local human rights organizations, including some with machete wounds. The PPRD youth leader, Pathy Zingi, known as “Pathy Benz,” speaking to Human Rights Watch, [denied allegations](#) against him that he had provided party members with machetes.

During the July 9 protests, the police killed two demonstrators in Lubumbashi. Scores more were injured in the mayhem. There were also protests across the capital, Kinshasa, where at least one demonstrator was also killed and protesters beat a police officer to death while another officer was severely wounded.

Relatives of Matanda, who had taken part in demonstrations on July 9, told Human Rights Watch that having not heard from him again after the protest, they went searching for him and found him on July 11 in detention at a military building in the Golf neighborhood. “A soldier called his name and he stood up,” a relative said. “We saw him with the clothes he was wearing. They asked us for US \$300 [to free him] but we didn’t have this kind of money.” Relatives who later identified him at the morgue said he was wearing the same clothes they saw him wearing in detention. Pictures seen by Human Rights Watch reveal a body marked with cuts, bruises to the face, and apparent burns.

Mpiana’s relatives said he had gone to the demonstration on July 9 but had not returned home. “We went looking for him in all police cells, hospitals, and morgues but we couldn’t find him,” said his father, Germain Kazadi. “His head had been smashed – they must have hit him in the head like they wanted to kill a goat – and his ears were cut off. They opened his belly [for the autopsy] to check whether he had drowned but it wasn’t that.”

Relatives of Ntumba, who was reported missing after the July 9 demonstration, and UDPS members said that his corpse showed marks that could amount to evidence of torture. “We could see burn marks, his nipples were cut off, his ears were torn, and his lips cut,” said UDPS local representative Bruno Tshibangu. “His arms were tied with a rope and a stick.”

The bodies of Matanda, Mpiana, and Ntumba were found near the Tshondo bridge, in the Gecamines neighborhood.

Confidential sources who have seen an autopsy report for Ntumba and Mpiana said that the reports for both men indicated they had died a “violent death” following trauma from assault and injury, suggesting that they were deliberately killed.

Human Rights Watch has also received credible information that other people who participated in the July 9 protest may still be unaccounted for. These reports of possible enforced disappearances should be verified and witnesses or family members who come forward should be protected. Congolese security forces should disclose the full list of those detained after the demonstration and of those released.

The governor of the Haut-Katanga province, Jacques Kyabula, a member of the PPRD, told Human Rights Watch by phone that his office referred the cases to judicial authorities for investigation after the bodies were found. “I don’t know whether other people are still missing,” he said. “We are waiting for the conclusions of the investigation [opened](#) on July 13].”

In line with Congo’s obligations under national and international human rights law, the investigation should be capable of establishing the facts surrounding these four men’s death, including whether they died following torture or other ill-treatment while in custody. According to Congolese law, military security personnel are precluded from detaining civilians in military facilities unless they are involved in a military offense.

“These killings seem to be part of a dramatic escalation in the political rivalries within the ruling coalition,” Fessy said. “The fate of these four men as well as that of those still allegedly missing should be fully investigated, and those responsible should be identified and prosecuted in fair trials.”

ecoi.net summary:



Appeal to conduct independent investigation into violent death of 4 members of president Tshisekedi’s political party

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