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Mass Arrests of Activists

(Kinshasa) – The arrest of at least 26 activists and others in Kinshasa on March 15, 2015, raises serious concerns of a broader crackdown on free expression before the 2016 [Democratic Republic of Congo](#) presidential elections, Human Rights Watch said today.

The arrests, including of foreign journalists and a United States diplomat, followed a news conference by the pro-democracy youth movement Filimbi, organized with support from the US embassy in Kinshasa.

On March 17, 2015, the authorities arrested and roughed up at least 10 Congolese activists in the eastern city of Goma during a peaceful protest outside the office of Congo's National Intelligence Agency (Agence Nationale de Renseignements, ANR), calling for the release of those arrested in Kinshasa. ANR agents beat a Belgian woman bystander who was later hospitalized, and briefly detained a Belgian journalist.

"The Congolese government's detention of pro-democracy activists is the latest alarming sign of a crackdown on peaceful protest ahead of next year's presidential elections," said [Ida Sawyer](#), senior Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. "Congolese authorities should immediately release those detained if they haven't been charged with a credible offense and ensure access to their lawyers and families."

Human Rights Watch called on United Nations Security Council members, who are due to discuss the situation in Congo on March 19, to publicly press Congolese authorities to immediately release all those detained for their peaceful activities and speech.

Among those arrested on March 15 were Congolese activists, musicians, journalists, technicians, and bystanders; youth leaders and activists from Senegal and Burkina Faso; a US diplomat; two French journalists; and the French director of a production company. The US and French citizens and two Congolese were released after several hours. The others remain detained, possibly by the intelligence agency. They have not been brought before a judge, officially charged with offenses, or had access to their lawyers or families, raising concerns for their safety.

Following the news conference at the Eloko Makasi music studio, men in military police uniform arrived at about 4 p.m. and began arresting people. Witnesses said that the officers at first targeted foreigners. They then began arresting Congolese as well, including those who were preparing the concert stage, and bystanders. The security forces were very rough with several Congolese and West Africans, witnesses said, banging the head of a Senegalese activist against the door of a pickup truck and beating others.

The security forces also took computers and other documents and materials from the hall and destroyed banners.

The military police drove those arrested away in at least three unmarked, white pickup trucks. The US and French citizens were taken to the headquarters of the ANR in Kinshasa, where they were interrogated by senior intelligence officials, then released after several hours. It is not known where the Congolese, Senegalese, and

Burkinabe citizens are being detained.

Communications Minister Lambert Mende told journalists that the activists from Senegal and Burkina Faso were “promoting violence through a form of training ... coaching of certain youth groups close to a certain opposition to use violent means against other groups or against the institutions of the republic.”

Several Congolese pro-democracy organizations had organized a workshop to introduce Filimbi (“whistle” in Swahili), a new Congolese youth movement. The workshop’s objectives were to promote civic engagement and youth mobilization, and to discuss how Congolese youth can organize in a peaceful and responsible manner to fulfill their duties as citizens.

Youth leaders and activists from Senegal and Burkina Faso came to Kinshasa for the workshop to share their experiences. The Senegalese were members of Y’en a Marre, a group involved in protests against former President Abdoulaye Wade’s controversial bid for a third term in 2012. Those from Burkina Faso were part of Balai Citoyen, a group that participated in protests against former President Blaise Compaoré’s attempt to change the constitution to extend his 27-year term.

“Y’en a Marre and Balai Citoyen are well respected organizations that have worked to promote responsible, civic engagement by youth in West Africa,” Sawyer said. “They came to Kinshasa to share their experiences with Congolese youth, including the importance of peaceful means for youth to engage in the political process.”

Filimbi worked in partnership with Eloko Makasi, a socially conscious music and video production company based in Kinshasa’s Masina neighborhood. Musicians who participated in the workshop went to the Eloko Makasi studio on March 14, 2015, to create a song based on what was discussed at the workshop to encourage Congolese youth to be involved in the democratic process and to promote a free, transparent, and peaceful electoral process.

In a March 16 [statement](#), the US embassy in Kinshasa said the Filimbi workshop was one of many activities the US government supports that involve youth and civil society. “These well-known, well-regarded, non-partisan youth groups as well as the organizers of the weekend’s events intended to promote Congolese youth participation in the political process and encourage young people to express their views about issues of concern to them,” the statement said. “DRC government officials and ruling coalition parties were invited to and some were present during the event.”

Under Congo’s constitution, presidents may serve only two consecutive terms. President Joseph Kabila’s second term ends in 2016. While presidential elections are not scheduled until November 2016, political tensions have been rising across the country. In January 2015, at least 40 people were [killed](#) when security forces brutally repressed demonstrations in Kinshasa and other cities to protest proposed changes to Congo’s electoral law that would have delayed elections and enabled Kabila to prolong his term. Numerous political party and civil society leaders have been [arrested](#) after speaking out against proposed changes to the constitution or Congo’s electoral system.

“These latest arrests signal a worrying clampdown on freedom of expression and assembly in Congo – fundamental elements of a free, transparent, and peaceful electoral process,” Sawyer said. “Youth leaders, musicians, and activists should be able to meet, discuss, and learn without fear of arrest.”