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AI – Amnesty International

DRC: Authorities must halt crackdown on peaceful protests

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At least 23 peaceful protesters were injured today in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), six of them severely, while another 89 were arrested in the capital Kinshasa, and in Goma, Lubumbashi, Bukavu, Mbandaka, Mbuji-Mayi and Tshikapa as police violently dispersed peaceful protests on the use of electronic voting machines in the upcoming elections slated for 23 December.

In addition, Amnesty International has established that two women protestors were sexually assaulted in Bukavu, and three journalists – correspondents of Reuters and the Voice of America (VOA) and a local reporter from Congo Synthese, were roughed up and threatened by the police while reporting on the protests in eastern city of Goma.

“With barely three months left to the elections, the DRC authorities persist in closing down civic space and cracking down on peaceful protests. As we have seen today, dissenting voices are repressed yet supporters of President Joseph Kabila and his coalition’s designated presidential candidate Emmanuel Ramazani Shadary are left to hold rallies and demonstrations unhindered,” said Jean-Mobert Senga, Amnesty International’s Researcher on the DRC.

“The international community must move beyond polite appeals and take concrete steps to hold the authorities and responsible security officials to account for the continued repression.

“Respect for the rights to freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly and press must be guaranteed before, during and after the elections. Everyone must enjoy equal protection of the law and the authorities must stop targeting civil society, journalists and the political opposition. The persistent stifling of citizen voices is undoubtedly designed to silence critics and instill fear ahead of the upcoming elections.”

The protests organized in multiple cities countrywide by the youth movement LUCHA were dispersed on unsubstantiated public order and security grounds.

In Lubumbashi, the mayor responded to a letter from LUCHA notifying him of the planned protests by stopping them for “lack of valid and objective reasons for your refusal of the use of electronic voting machines by the CENI”. CENI is the Independent National Electoral Commission.

In Goma, police kicked and beat up protesters with batons and gun butts as they marched peacefully towards the electoral commission office to submit a petition.

“The DRC authorities must immediately and unconditionally release every peaceful protestor they have arrested and ensure all those injured receive proper medical treatment,” said Jean-Mobert Senga.

“The authorities must also formally lift the ban on protests by issuing specific instructions to administrative offices and law enforcement agencies to let people exercise their right to freedom of assembly, regardless of their political persuasions.”

Background

The protests were organized to demand that the electoral commission (CENI) drop plans to use electronic voting machines, and to clean up the voters’ roll. A recent audit of the voter register undertaken by OIF - Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie - found that 16% of the registered voters did not have their fingerprints on record.

The long-delayed elections are expected to take place on 23 December 2018. President Kabila will not be a candidate, although he remains in office after his last constitutionally-mandated term under the two-term limit ended in December 2016; and opposition leaders have so far been prevented from registering to run for president.

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ecoi.net summary:

Police violently crack down on protests in several cities; at least 23 peaceful protesters injured and 89 arrested



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