

# The State of the World's Human Rights; Burundi 2024

Journalists and others who spoke out against authority figures faced arbitrary arrest, detention and physical attacks. Certain offences by the media were decriminalized. The government continued to interfere in the internal affairs of the political opposition. Arrests and enforced disappearances of opposition members continued. Healthcare for detainees was inadequate. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's mandate expanded to include land disputes. Discrimination against LGBTI people and unmarried women continued. The cost-of-living crisis worsened with rising fuel and food prices. There were more than 86,000 internally displaced people due to climate-related extreme weather, and more than 289,500 Burundians remained as refugees in neighbouring countries.

## Background

Ahead of the 2025 legislative and local elections, a new electoral code, adopted in June, significantly increased the deposits candidates must pay to stand in elections.

The first national census since 2008 took place in September, collecting data on population, housing, agriculture and livestock.

Tensions with Rwanda persisted. In January, Burundi closed the border with Rwanda in response to attacks claimed by the armed group Resistance for the Rule of Law in Burundi (RED-Tabara), which the UN Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo accused Rwanda of supporting. Burundian armed forces continued their deployment in the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), under a bilateral agreement signed in February between Burundi and the DRC, following the East African Community Regional Force's withdrawal in December 2023.

In June, the Sub-Committee on Accreditation of the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions recommended that Burundi's National Independent Human Rights Commission be downgraded due to insufficient independence and effectiveness. In October the UN Human Rights Council renewed the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Burundi.

## Freedom of expression, association and assembly

On 13 February the Cassation Chamber of the Supreme Court upheld journalist Floriane Irangabiye's conviction, which related to her criticism of the government. On 14 August, she received a presidential pardon. She was released on 16 August.<sup>1</sup>

Journalist Sandra Muhoza was arrested on 12 April and later charged with "endangering internal state security" and "ethnic aversion" for comments she made in a WhatsApp group.<sup>2</sup> Her trial, scheduled for 5 September, was postponed reportedly because there was no fuel to transport prisoners to the court. In a hearing on 12 November the prosecution sought a 12-year sentence. On 16 December she was convicted and sentenced to 21 months in prison.

Several journalists working for Iwacu newspaper (one of the last remaining independent media houses) and other private media organizations faced physical attacks, arrests and detention. On 6 June, Iwacu received a warning from the National Communication Council, an official body, on the grounds of "serious professional misconduct", which cited several articles published by Iwacu,

without indicating specific concerns. On the night of 25 June, unidentified people threw stones for several hours into Iwacu's office compound in Bujumbura.<sup>3</sup>

The media law was revised for the fourth time since 2013, with the introduction of what was described as a partial decriminalization of press offences. Under the new law, promulgated by the president in July, the punishment for anyone who publishes or broadcasts information constituting the offences of "insult", "harmful imputation", "contempt", "dissemination of false news", "public outrage against good morals", "slandering denunciation", "invasion of privacy", "attack on the presumption of innocence" and "revelation of the identity of a victim of sexual violence", was reduced to a fine rather than a prison sentence.

The government continued to interfere in the internal affairs of the National Congress for Liberty (CNL) opposition party. In March, the interior minister refused the CNL president, Agathon Rwasa, permission to hold an extraordinary congress. The same month, the minister formally, and rapidly, acknowledged the report and outcomes of an extraordinary congress of CNL members opposed to Agathon Rwasa at which he was replaced as party leader. Agathon Rwasa's replacement, Nestor Girukwishaka, was considered to be close to the ruling National Council for the Defence of Democracy-Forces for the Defence of Democracy (CNDD-FDD) party.

## **Arbitrary arrests and detentions**

Arrests of opposition political party members were reported regularly, including members of the Movement for Solidarity and Democracy, Front for Democracy in Burundi and CNL. In March, CNL members loyal to Agathon Rwasa were arrested on their way to and outside the congress where he was replaced (see above).

Trade unionist Émilienne Sibomana was released from prison on 21 November, more than four months after her acquittal on 28 June by the Gitega Court of Appeal on charges of "slandering denunciation". She had been arrested in January 2023, the day after she accused a school principal of sexual abuse during a public meeting at which the education minister was present.

## **Enforced disappearances**

The Forum for Consciousness and Development, a Burundian NGO, documented 34 cases of enforced disappearance between January and June, primarily of political opposition party members. There was no news on the fate or whereabouts of 24 of them by the end of June.

## **Inhumane detention conditions**

Prisoners were denied access to adequate medical care and family visits. Prisons were chronically overcrowded.

Christophe Sahabo, who was arrested in April 2022 in a dispute over the management of Kira Hospital, remained in detention with major delays in his court case. During a hearing at Muha High Court in Bujumbura on 10 September, he vomited and collapsed and was transferred to hospital where he underwent tests and began treatment. Despite a recommendation to keep him under medical observation for several days, he was transferred back to Ruyigi Prison (160km from the hospital) on 12 September. His family members were refused access to him in prison on 14 September. Two independent doctors reviewed Christophe Sahabo's medical notes and test results and confirmed that his condition was potentially life-threatening and required urgent medical attention.<sup>4</sup>

## **Right to truth, justice and reparation**

In May the mandate of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (CVR) was renewed for a further four years. In a significant expansion of its remit, it assumed responsibility for cases that were left unresolved by the National Commission for Land and Other Properties (CNTB) when the latter's mandate ended in 2022, as well as new land dispute cases. Between 2006 and 2022, the CNTB was charged with resolving land disputes relating to returning refugees and internally displaced people who had fled during past periods of violence. The CVR law states that there is no judicial appeal for its decisions.

## **Discrimination**

Both the prosecution and defence lodged appeals in the case of 24 people arrested in the capital, Gitega, at a workshop on economic inclusion in February 2023. They, and two others later added to the case, had been prosecuted for “homosexuality” and “incitement to debauchery”. In January the Gitega Court of Appeal acquitted all 26 defendants on the “homosexuality” charge. Five people were found guilty of “inciting debauchery” and sentenced to one year in prison and a fine. They were released in February.

High-level officials continued to use violent and inflammatory rhetoric against LGBTI people. During a speech for International Women's Day in March, President Ndayishimiye stated in Kirundi: “I've said it and I repeat it, homosexuals should be publicly stoned.”

Officials in several provinces conducted a campaign against “concubinage” (the cohabitation of a married person with someone who is not their spouse, which is illegal under Burundian law). As a result, between January and June, 900 women and 3,600 children were driven from their homes in Ngozi Province. Also in Ngozi Province, the governor issued a deadline of 30 June for 1,300 couples not registered with the civil registry to regularize their marriages.

## **Economic and social rights**

Burundi's strained economic situation deteriorated and the government failed to respond effectively. High inflation rates and a scarcity of hard currency contributed to severe fuel shortages which left commuters struggling to get to work. Food prices increased steeply – the price of sugar, for example, rose by 150% in mid-September. In July, the price of potatoes was 45% above the five-year average.

As in previous election cycles, from August onwards there were widespread reports of individuals and businesses being forced to pay contributions to the CNDD-FDD party, with access to services denied to those who refused.

## **Right to a healthy environment**

As of December, 86,159 people remained internally displaced, 93% of them due to extreme weather events in part driven by climate change, including torrential rains, landslides and flooding of rivers and the shores of Lake Tanganyika, which affected at least 298,000 people overall. The World Weather Attribution initiative called on Burundi to improve its existing disaster preparedness policies and early warning systems to reduce the impacts of such events. With the support of UNDP, the government launched a USD 10 million climate resilience project in September in some of the most affected areas in and around Bujumbura.

## **Refugees' and migrants' rights**

There were 289,621 Burundian refugees living in neighbouring countries as of 31 December; 20,081 refugees returned to Burundi from countries in the region, primarily Tanzania, in 2024. Returnees constituted 7% of internally displaced people inside Burundi. In the Kirundo and Cankuzo border provinces, that proportion rose to 35% and 21%, respectively.

The Tanzanian authorities sent mixed messages about the future of Burundian refugees in the country. In March, Tanzania's Kigoma Regional Commissioner held a mass meeting with refugees, reiterating calls on Burundian refugees to voluntarily register for repatriation, adding that refugee status would be rescinded in January 2025 and that Nduta camp would be closed by 31 December 2024. The Tanzanian Ministry of Home Affairs subsequently assured UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, that the camps there would remain open and no one would be forced to return.

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