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Rwanda 2020

The authorities took measures to promote the right to health during the COVID-19 pandemic and promised accountability for excessive use of force by police officers. Reports of enforced disappearances, arbitrary detention, excessive use of force, unfair trials and restrictions on the right to freedom of expression continued.

Right to health

In March, the authorities responded rapidly to the COVID-19 pandemic, imposing a strict nationwide lockdown and suspending commercial flights. They provided free treatment and mass testing. Until mid-May, the government covered the cost of mandatory quarantine for travellers entering the country. Thereafter, it offered subsidized provision.

Children’s rights

In January, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child reviewed the government’s report and commended Rwanda’s progress in reducing poverty and infant and child mortality rates, improving access to education and health services, and fighting HIV/AIDS. Meanwhile, it urged the government to take further measures to tackle sexual exploitation and abuse of children, to ensure that protection of children with disabilities included those with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities, and to ensure the police fully respected the rights of children living on the streets.

Sexual and reproductive rights

In May, the President pardoned 36 women convicted for abortion. All except eight of them were arrested and convicted after 2018 Penal Code revisions. While abortion remained illegal in most circumstances, the 2018 Penal Code introduced legal exceptions in cases of rape, incest or forced marriage.

Right to life

On 17 February, the Rwanda National Police announced that the popular singer Kizito Mihigo had been found dead that morning in his cell in Remera police station in the capital, Kigali. Three days earlier the Rwanda Investigation Bureau (RIB) had confirmed his arrest on charges which included joining “terrorist” groups and attempting to cross the border illegally. There was no independent investigation into his death. The National Public Prosecution Authority concluded he died by suicide and that there was no basis for criminal charges, in a finding based on a RIB investigation and the Rwanda Forensic Laboratory.¹

Enforced disappearances

Enforced disappearances of political opposition members continued and several probable cases from previous years remained unresolved. In June, Venant Abayisenga, a member of Development and Liberty for All (DALFA-Umurinzi), and former member of the United Democratic Forces (FDU-Inkingi), both unregistered opposition political parties, was reported missing. He had been acquitted in January of forming an irregular armed group and released from prison. He told the media that he was tortured in detention. His whereabouts remained unknown at the end of the year.

Rwanda had not ratified the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.²

Excessive use of force

In September, following an outcry on social media in response to police use of excessive, and at times lethal, force, including in response to alleged curfew violations, the President and the Minister of Justice condemned the actions of individual police officers. They said these actions violated operational guidelines and promised to hold perpetrators accountable. On 9 September, a police spokesperson said several officers were in custody while investigations and prosecutions were ongoing.

unfair trials

On 31 August, the RIB announced the arrest of Paul Rusesabagina, famed as the manager of Hotel des Milles Collines where over 1,200 people sought refuge during the 1994 genocide. He was later charged with offences including terrorism, arson, kidnap and murder in relation to his support for an armed group. He had left Dubai overnight on 27/28 August in mysterious circumstances; in court in November, he said that he had been abducted and blindfolded with his arms and legs bound. The authorities refused to explain how he arrived in Kigali but asserted that due process had been followed. He was initially denied access to a lawyer hired by his family and chose two lawyers from a list of pro bono advocates. From November he was represented by the lawyer chosen by his family. He remained in pre-trial detention at the end of the year, after three requests for release on bail were denied.³

Right to truth, justice and reparation

In May, Félicien Kabuga, acknowledged as a chief financier of the 1994 genocide, was arrested by French authorities in a Paris suburb. In 1997 the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), which tried genocide cases until 2015, indicted him on seven counts of genocide and related crimes. He was transferred to the custody of the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT) in The Hague in October, and a plea of not guilty was entered during a pre-trial hearing in November.

In May, the IRMCT Chief Prosecutor confirmed DNA tests had proved that Augustin Bizimana, whom the ICTR had indicted in 2001 for genocide, had died in 2000 in the Republic of the Congo.

The authorities sought the extradition of genocide suspect Aloys Ntwiragabo from France. In July, a preliminary investigation for crimes against humanity was launched in France after a journalist located him in Orléans, about 100km south-west of Paris.

Arbitrary detention

A night-time curfew was introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Police instructed those alleged to have violated the curfew to report to centres, including open-air stadiums, where they remained until the end of curfew the next morning. The police spokesperson said these were not “detention or prison facilities” but “central grounds used to control movements during curfew hours as well as sensitization centres with space for physical distancing, where people are educated on the pandemic and safety practices.”

In July, the Rwanda National Police published a list of 498 motorists (including some registration plate details) who, since April, had allegedly ignored orders and not reported to the centres. Those who did not report to the police within an allotted time were warned they would be arrested. Several similar lists were published on a regular basis until October.

Freedom of expression

In April, several YouTube bloggers reported on allegations that soldiers raped women and committed other human rights violations during lockdown in the Kangondo II neighbourhood known as “Bannyaha” in Kigali. Although the Rwanda Defence Force announced on 4 April that they were holding five soldiers suspected of involvement in these crimes, four bloggers who reported on the abuses and other consequences related to the authorities’ COVID-19 response, were later arrested. Two of the bloggers were provisionally released later the same month, and one was released on bail in May while Dieudonné Niyonsenga, also known as Cyuma Hassan, and his driver, Fidèle Komezusenge, remained in detention at the end of the year. The Rwanda Media Commission said that bloggers were not recognized as journalists and were “not authorized to interview the population.”

Refugees and asylum-seekers

In late August, UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, and the governments of Rwanda and Burundi began to facilitate organized returns of Burundian refugees from Rwanda.

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1. [Rwanda: Shocking death of gospel singer in custody must be effectively investigated \(Press release, 17 February\)](#)
 2. [Rwanda: More progress needed on human rights commitments: Amnesty International submission for the UN Universal Periodic Review, 37th session of the UPR Working Group, January-February 2021 \(AFR 47/2858/2020\)](#)
 3. [Rwanda: Paul Rusesabagina must be guaranteed a fair trial \(Press release, 14 September\)](#)

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