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Uganda: Authorities subjecting opposition supporters to “brutal campaign of repression” ahead of elections

Ugandan security forces have unlawfully targeted opposition rallies with unnecessary and excessive force and arbitrary arrests, and subjected some attendees to torture or other ill-treatment, Amnesty International said today.

The organization has documented incidents in which security officers launched tear gas at peaceful crowds in Kawempe and Iganga, and pepper-sprayed and beat people. These actions were accompanied by undue movement restrictions aimed at disrupting the opposition party National Unity Platform’s (NUP) campaign rallies.

Amnesty International also received reports and verified digital evidence of such disruptions in other parts of the country.

“The authorities have launched a brutal campaign of repression against the opposition and its supporters, making it extremely difficult for them to exercise their rights to freedom of

association and peaceful assembly,” said Tigere Chagutah, Amnesty International’s Regional Director for East and Southern Africa.

“The Ugandan authorities must uphold their human rights obligations and allow the opposition to hold its campaign rallies without undue restrictions and without subjecting their leaders and supporters to arrests, torture or other ill-treatment.”

An eyewitness told Amnesty International that during the Kawempe rally on 24 November, following the arrival of NUP presidential candidate Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, popularly known as Bobi Wine, “police launched tear gas and pepper spray, to stop the rally”. The ensuing panic led to a stampede which caused dozens of people to fall into a deep ditch nearby. The police also used dogs to intimidate the crowd, pushed people into a truck with the butts of their rifles and beat them with batons and wires.



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Tigere Chagutah, Amnesty International’s Regional Director for East and Southern

Africa

According to one attendee of the NUP rally at Iganga’s Railway grounds on 28 November, the military used a truck to block one of the exits before opening fire on the crowd as they were attempting to leave the venue from the only remaining exit. One attendee of the rally, Miseach Okello, 35, died in circumstances that could be indicative of the unlawful use of force; an unknown number of others were injured.

The deceased’s family told Amnesty International that armed security officers prevented them from witnessing the postmortem process, apparently to prevent them from gathering evidence that could suggest that he was killed unlawfully. The family was never given a death certificate, nor were they told the cause of death.

“Nobody should die simply for exercising their rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly. Authorities must immediately open impartial and thorough investigations into all alleged instances of unlawful use of force by security forces. Those responsible should be brought to justice in fair trials without recourse to the death penalty,” said Tigere Chagutah.

Following the Kawempe and Iganga incidents, the Ugandan police justified their actions by stating that opposition supporters had stoned police and vandalized their vehicles. However, eyewitnesses at both rallies told Amnesty International that the crowds were peaceful and only carried the Ugandan national flag.

International law and standards require police to always apply non-violent means first before resorting to force, and to limit the force used no more than is necessary and proportionate. The use of firearms to disperse assemblies will never meet these conditions and so is always unlawful.

Undue restrictions on freedom of movement

Amnesty International verified a video recorded in Nwoya on 6 November showing security forces using military vehicles to block an opposition candidate and his supporters from campaigning.

Interviewees said that alongside these tactics, security forces also closed roads and diverted opposition processions onto longer routes without providing any legal justification. They believed these movement restrictions were designed either to delay opposition leaders and their supporters from reaching designated campaign venues or to prevent the events from going ahead altogether.

Interviewees also told Amnesty International that NUP presidential candidate was prevented from reaching campaign venues in several other districts.

Such restrictions are not permissible in the context of peaceful assemblies. Any restrictions must have a basis in domestic law, pursue a legitimate aim, and be necessary and proportionate.

Arbitrary arrests and torture and other ill-treatment

According to multiple sources including the NUP and an independent civil society organization, over 400 people have been arrested for attending rallies in different parts of the country, or for being perceived to be supporters of the NUP.

According to court charge sheets seen by Amnesty International, the majority of those arrested were charged with causing malicious damage to property, obstruction, incitement to violence, and assaulting police officers. While Amnesty International has not been able to investigate all incidents, evidence suggests that, in at least some cases, people were detained solely for their perceived support for the NUP.

Four interviewees who either attended or were in the vicinity of the Kawempe rally said that they were subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment by the police. They reported being beaten with batons pepper-sprayed in the mouth and tasered. They said they witnessed many others being subjected to similar treatment.

Peter*, who was arrested on his way home from work on 24 November, said he was held alongside others who were arrested during an opposition rally. They were held at Mulago police station for three days without access to their loved ones. Because of the torture he was subjected to, Peter lost a tooth, and his arm was broken. Amnesty International reviewed his medical reports that confirmed the broken arm.

Ugandan authorities must commit to respecting, protecting, promoting and ensuring full respect for human rights before, during and after the elections.

Tigere Chagutah

Harrison, * who was also arrested in relation to the Kawempe rally, said the police accused them of “destabilizing the country.”

He described the torture or other ill treatment he endured: “They started pepper spraying us and pulled me out of the vehicle into a police truck... I found 20 comrades who had been beaten seriously. We were taken to Kawempe police station.”

Maria* said: “When they came to our vehicle, they tased us. They separated us and took me to another vehicle where they started beating me. They used a baton to beat me. One officer’s baton broke, and he asked his colleague to give him another baton. Then they asked me ‘Do you still support Bobi Wine?’ I said yes. Then they continued to beat me.”

“Ugandan authorities must commit to respecting, protecting, promoting and ensuring full respect for human rights before, during and after the elections,” said Tigere Chagutah. “They must immediately and unconditionally release anyone detained solely for attending opposition rallies or for their actual or perceived support for the NUP.”

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