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DR Congo: Bloody Crackdown on Political Religious Group

(Kinshasa) – Police in the [Democratic Republic of Congo](#) repeatedly used excessive lethal force against a separatist religious movement in April 2020, killing at least 55 people and wounding scores more. The government crackdown against the *Bundu dia Kongo* occurred from April 13 to 24 in several towns in western Kongo Central province and in the country's capital, Kinshasa.

The call by BDK leader Zacharie Badiengila, commonly known as *Ne Muanda Nsemi* (“the creative spirit” in Kikongo), for his supporters to “chase” out people who were not of Kongo ethnicity triggered the government response. The police raid against the group in the Kongo Central town of Songololo on April 22 resulted in 15 deaths and the raid on April 24 on Nsemi’s Kinshasa residence killed at least 33 people.

“Congolese authorities had a responsibility to respond to the BDK movement’s messages that incite ethnic hatred,” said [Lewis Mudge](#), Central Africa director at Human Rights Watch. “However, the government response violated international standards on the use of force, causing a bloodbath.”

Human Rights Watch interviewed by phone more than 50 people, including victims of abuses and witnesses, BDK members, hospital staff, government and United Nations officials, human rights activists, and journalists.

On April 12, Nsemi, a former member of parliament and self-proclaimed “president of the Federal Republic of Kongo Central,” published a new installment of his regular newsletter called “*Kongo Dieto*,” or “Our Kongo” in Kikongo, the language spoken by the Bakongo people, the main ethnic group in Kongo Central. The four-page document urged his supporters to “stand up and chase every Muluba, every Mungala, and every Muswahili [people from other ethnic groups]” out of the Kongo Central province and to be “ruthless” against them.

Tensions escalated between April 13 and 15 as hundreds of BDK members erected roadblocks in the towns of Boma, Kisantu, Sona-Bata, Lemba, and Songololo, chanting anti-ethnic slogans and threatening “foreign ethnic groups.” Some carried long sticks and palm nuts, while a few were armed with locally made rifles. Police forces deployed to disperse the small crowds at times fired live ammunition. Witnesses and police reports, among other sources, said at least six BDK members and one bystander were killed in the towns of Kisantu, Sona-Bata, and Boma. A BDK member allegedly fatally shot a police officer in Kisantu on April 13.

Before dawn on April 22, police encircled a house in Songololo where dozens of BDK members, including women and children, had gathered to plan demonstrations. Around 3 a.m., the police fired indiscriminately at the house, set it on fire, then shot and crushed people rushing outside in panic, killing at least 15 and injuring many others. Witnesses said local gang members chanting “It’s about to get messy!” in Lingala stormed the house shortly after the police had gone and attacked those left behind.

“I was asleep when the shooting began and [it] woke me up,” one BDK member who was in the house told Human Rights Watch. “I managed to escape before they burned the house.”

Another member said:

Some of us were praying when they started to shoot. When they realized that we weren’t coming out, they set the house on fire and used tear gas. We couldn’t breathe so we were forced out and they would shoot us as we were coming out. I took a bullet in my hip, but they were also using machetes. I have a machete wound on my head and another on my arm.

Some BDK members told Human Rights Watch that they tried to defend themselves against the police with whatever they could find. “I picked up rocks and I threw them at the police,” said another member. “I took a bullet in the thigh, but I also injured an officer in the face.”

Photos and a video alleged to have been shot on the morning of April 22, which Human Rights Watch authenticated, show over a dozen bodies and badly injured people, all of whom had apparently been moved from the house and displayed for a police delegation that attracted crowds of onlookers. In the video, a sharp wooden stick is thrown at one of the wounded and shortly afterward a police officer walks among the bodies with a machete in hand.

A witness said that some bodies had both bullet wounds and machete cuts, suggesting that they had first been shot and then struck with machetes or axes. Some of the bodies were apparently mutilated, the witness said. Human rights standards set out that the wounded should be transported to the hospital as soon as possible and the dead should not be degraded, Human Rights Watch said.

The interior minister, Gilbert Kankonde, told Human Rights Watch by phone that investigations were still ongoing at the Kongo Central provincial level. “If wrongdoings were found at the command level, the military prosecutor’s office will have to take care of it,” he said. Kankonde added that according to the police, BDK members had attacked the police first with machetes and arrows.

On April 22, police and military police in Kinshasa encircled Nsemi’s residence while a delegation of government officials was inside, negotiating his surrender to authorities who had charged him with “rebellion, threatening the state security, and incitement to tribal hatred.” For weeks, he had been requesting, in writing and in video statements, the payment of his parliamentary allowance, the release of BDK members from prison, and the appointment of native Bakongo people in administrative positions in the Kongo Central province, among other demands.

On April 24, after negotiations failed, the police raided the residence, where more than 200 BDK supporters had gathered, and arrested Nsemi. Sustained gunfire could be heard throughout the neighborhood as police stormed the compound. The interior minister said in a [media statement](#) that during the April 24 assault, 8 people had been killed and 43 others wounded, including 8 police officers. However, Human Rights Watch found that at least 33 BDK members had been killed.

Nearly 200 BDK members, including children, were briefly detained before being transported in buses to their towns and villages in Kongo Central. Forty-seven are now in prison and charged with “insurrection, rebellion, illegal possession of weapons of war, and incitement to tribal hatred.” Nsemi is being held at the Neuro-Psycho-Pathology Center in Kinshasa after doctors on April 30 [diagnosed](#) him with a mental health disorder caused by “repeated stress.”

In Kongo Central, immediately after the raid, the police arbitrarily arrested and beat several BDK members. They included a woman who said that police stripped her in the street, later raped her, and detained her for two days in the town of Kisantu. The woman said she has not received medical care or counseling for the abuse.

Following Nsemi’s arrest, police [looted](#) his residence as photos emerged of officers walking away with items such as a TV set and his throne chair.

The authorities should conduct a prompt and impartial investigation into the deadly raids in Songololo, Kinshasa, and elsewhere, Human Rights Watch said. The investigation should examine police use of lethal force with the aim of holding to account those found responsible for abuses, including those bearing command responsibility. There should be a full accounting of those killed and injured in the raids and of those charged with criminal offenses.

“The government needs to get to the bottom of these violent raids and hold wrongdoers to account, whatever their rank,” Mudge said. “That’s the only way for the authorities to send a clear message that abuses and excessive use of force will not be tolerated.”

Bundu dia Kongo (BDK)

Bundu dia Kongo (in Kikongo, “The Church or Assembly of the Kongo”) is a politico-religious movement founded in 1969 by Ne Muanda Nsemi, a former chemist-turned-spiritual leader. The BDK, also known as Bundu dia Mayala, advocates a return to African authenticity and bases its teachings on visions revealed to Nsemi by the spirits of his people.

Nsemi alleges that the Bakongo people are oppressed and have little access to high-level positions, even in their home province. He favors removing “outsiders” from such posts and calls for the resources of Kongo Central (formerly Bas Congo) to be primarily used for the development of the region. The BDK had long aimed for greater autonomy for Kongo Central within a federal system. On April 12, Nsemi declared Kongo Central independent and proclaimed himself president of the “Federal Republic of Kongo Central.”

BDK followers worship in a temple, known as a “zikua,” the first of which was established in Kinshasa and served as the original center for recruiting disciples known as “makesa.” The Congolese government has long alleged that the BDK was an armed group and in 2008, the provincial government classified the movement as a “terrorist organization.” BDK members ordinarily carry sticks and other wooden weapons, though some have been using locally made rifles. The BDK claims to have thousands of supporters but this has not been independently verified.

Throughout 2007 and 2008, in a number of Kongo Central locations where BDK support was strong and state infrastructures weak, the BDK declared themselves in charge of local administrations. Their de facto authority was accompanied by episodes of harassment, violence, and summary justice meted out by BDK adherents.

Previous Crackdowns on BDK

In Kongo Central, in February 2007 and March 2008, state agents acting under then-President [Joseph Kabila's authority used excessive force against BDK followers](#) when they protested, at times violently, against electoral corruption after gubernatorial elections. Police and government soldiers shot or stabbed to death 104 BDK supporters and bystanders. In March 2008, police conducted operations in Kongo Central, killing over 200 BDK supporters and others and systematically destroying the BDK's meeting places. UN investigators said several elements suggested that “the authorities may have intended to [considerably reduce the operational capacity of the BDK movement](#).” The Congolese government response when challenged about these actions was denial and cover-up.

Between January and March and during [August of 2017, state security forces killed](#) at least 90 people as part of a [crackdown against BDK members in Kinshasa and Kongo Central](#). Some of the BDK members also used violence, killing at least five police officers.

Two weeks before the April 2020 crackdown, on March 30, the police opened fire on BDK demonstrators in Kinshasa, killing at least 3 people and injuring 11 others, according to a UN source. BDK members were marching to “chase the spirit of the coronavirus.”

No independent and transparent judicial investigation has been conducted into the abuses committed by state security forces in Kongo Central in 2007 and 2008, nor into the violence in Kinshasa and Kongo Central in 2017.

Government Response

On April 16, the National Intelligence Agency (*Agence Nationale de Renseignement*, ANR) [arrested journalist Carlys Kaluungila in Matadi](#) and accused him of giving an erroneous death toll about the violence in Boma the previous day. He was released on April 17.

On April 22, in a [news release](#), Interior Minister Gilbert Kankonde said that the police had conducted an operation in Songololo with the border police from Lufu to restore law and order, alleging that the BDK was planning a “hunt” against people coming from other regions. He added that the police faced “fierce resistance” and that the local population came to “lend a hand.” According to Kankonde, 14 BDK members were killed, 2 others seriously injured, and 7 police officers were badly wounded. In addition, a Kalashnikov assault rifle, 2 locally made shotguns, and 11 arrows were seized. The minister called on the Kongo Central's military prosecutor to open investigations into the Songolo incidents.

On April 24, Kinshasa's police commissioner, Gen. Sylvano Kasongo, said that the [police officers who looted Ne Muanda Nsemi's residence would be sanctioned](#). Many of his belongings have been returned to the residence.

Applicable Legal Standards

The UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials offer important guidance on the use of force by police and other state agents in circumstances of civil unrest. The principles state that officials exercising police powers shall “not use firearms against persons except in self-defense or defense of others against the imminent threat of death or serious injury ... and only when less extreme means are insufficient to achieve these objectives” and that “[i]n any event, intentional lethal use of firearms may only be made when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life.”

Governments have a duty to investigate and prosecute serious violations of physical integrity under international law. International human rights law also enshrines the right to an effective remedy. A victim's right to an effective remedy not only obligates the state to prevent, investigate, and punish serious human rights violations, but also to provide reparations. Among various reparations mechanisms, governments should restore the right violated and provide compensation for damages.

ecoi.net summary:



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