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DR Congo: Enforced Disappearances Surge in Kinshasa

- Congolese security forces have been responsible for numerous enforced disappearances in and around Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, since March 2025.
- The Congolese government is using the National Cyber Defense Council (CNC) as a proxy to carry out arrests and detentions of political opponents on dubious grounds.
- The authorities should ensure that all those taken into custody by the CNC are immediately released or brought before a judge and that any further detention fully complies with Congolese and international law.

(Nairobi) – Congolese security forces have been responsible for numerous enforced disappearances in and around Kinshasa, the capital of the [Democratic Republic of Congo](#), since March 2025, Human Rights Watch said today.

Human Rights Watch has documented that 17 people have been forcibly disappeared or reported missing in the past year and has received credible accounts of several additional cases. Many of those disappeared were found, often months later, in the custody of the National Cyber Defense Council (Conseil national de cyberdéfense, CNC), which has arbitrarily arrested and detained people alongside the Congolese National Police and the president's Republican Guard.

"For the past year, Congolese security forces have secretly arrested and detained people on spurious grounds in the heart of the capital," said [Lewis Mudge](#), Central Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "In most cases, the arrests seem to be politically motivated or of people suspected of supporting the armed group that has taken over parts of eastern Congo."

Between July 2025 and March 2026, Human Rights Watch interviewed over 34 people, including 9 former detainees of the CNC and 11 detainees' relatives. Human Rights Watch has withheld the names of those interviewed for their safety.

The CNC was created in 2023 by presidential ordinance to investigate cybercrimes. [International media](#) have reported that it has acquired advanced technology allowing targeted eavesdropping, especially on messaging apps. It has [expanded](#) into arrests, interrogations, and secret detention without judicial oversight.

Former detainees said that uniformed Republican Guards and national police as well as officials in civilian clothes carried out the arrests, some in the middle of the night. Several said they were blindfolded when transported to, or between, CNC detention centers. They said that they were not shown an arrest warrant and were refused access to lawyers.

The CNC first held and interrogated them at facilities at the national stadium, the Stade des Martyrs, or at its offices at the National Transport Office (Office National des Transports, or ONATRA) in Kinshasa. They said they were then moved to other locations in Kinshasa, including private rooms, possibly in hotels.

Former detainees said their interrogations had little to do with cyber intelligence and were based on accusations of collusion with the M23 armed group, which controls part of eastern Congo; ties to former President Joseph Kabila, who is accused of supporting the M23; or coup plots. Other detainees said they believed, based on interrogation questions, that they were held because of their opposition political views. One said that when he requested a lawyer, officials told him: "there is no law in these rooms."

According to their lawyers, five detainees were transferred from CNC custody into the military or civilian justice systems, where they face charges of crimes against state security or insulting the head of state. Two of these cases have reached trial and three are in preliminary proceedings. Eight other people have been released, while three more remain detained.

Former detainees said that other people may still be held in undisclosed detention centers without access to their families or lawyers.

In early September 2025, police, soldiers, and men in civilian clothes arrested at least 12 opposition members of parliament at a hotel in Kinshasa and took them to the CNC office at ONATRA. The lawmakers were accused of supporting the then head of the National Assembly, Vital Kamerhe, whom the ruling party eventually pushed out of his position. According to a former detainee and [media reports](#), the detainees were blindfolded when taken to ONATRA, where they were accused of corruption. They were told their immunity as parliamentarians was irrelevant before they were finally released that night and early the next day.

CNC officials met with Human Rights Watch on November 20 and December 5, when an official said that the unit exists to "coordinate essential services" and that its officials have the right to intervene when necessary. However, the official was vague about detentions, alluding to the government's authority to restrict people's liberty for necessary security reasons. In response to a letter from Human Rights Watch, Jean-Claude Bukasa, CNC's head and coordinator, wrote on February 17 that the CNC "does not have the power to arrest or detain" people.

Human Rights Watch had limited access to one CNC detention facility in November in the presence of Bukasa and his senior staff. A military magistrate and the president of the National Human Rights Commission were also present. Although controlled, the visit allowed Human Rights Watch to see the apparent living conditions of some detained military officers.

The CNC's abusive arrest and detention operations violate Congo's Code of Criminal Procedure as well as international human rights law, notably the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

International law defines an [enforced disappearance](#) as the deprivation of a person's liberty by state agents, or by those acting with the state's acquiescence, followed by a

refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the person's fate or whereabouts. All victims of enforced disappearances have a right to a remedy.

For those forcibly disappeared, the authorities should immediately acknowledge their detention, reveal their whereabouts, and allow them access to family members and legal counsel. The authorities should ensure that all those taken into custody by the CNC are immediately released or brought before a judge and that any further detention fully complies with Congolese and international law.

The authorities should impartially investigate all reported cases of enforced disappearances, even of those who have been subsequently released, and prevent such abuses in the future, Human Rights Watch said.

"The Congolese government is using the National Cyber Defense Council as a proxy to carry out arrests and detentions of civilians on dubious security grounds and we still don't know how many are still in detention," Mudge said. "The authorities need to release all those wrongfully held, investigate the CNC's operations, and put an end to its enforced disappearances."

For more details about the CNC's enforced disappearances in Kinshasa, please see below.

Armed Conflict with Rwanda and the M23

Congo is engaged in an armed conflict in the east with Rwandan government forces and the abusive [M23 armed group](#), which captured major cities in 2025. Hostilities have continued despite partial withdrawals, multiple fragile ceasefires, and peace accords brokered by the United States and Qatar.

Rwanda has been providing direct military support, including troops and logistics, to the M23, based on reports by the United Nations, Congo, and other governments, as well as Human Rights Watch, among others. The Congolese government has supported abusive [Wazalendo militias](#), fueling the violence amid mutual accusations of backing proxy militias and threats to regional stability.

Congo's government has accused former President Joseph Kabila of treason and support for the M23 and the Alliance Fleuve Congo, a political-military coalition that includes the M23 and other Congolese government opponents. Kabila, who visited M23-controlled areas in 2025 but is otherwise living in exile, received an *in absentia* death sentence in September after a politically motivated [trial](#).

National Cyber Defense Council Arrests

President Félix Tshisekedi established the CNC in 2023 and tasked it with coordinating services related to cyber defense and cyber intelligence. However, as the hostilities between the government and the M23 and Rwandan forces escalated, the unit became increasingly implicated in targeted arrests of individuals that it claimed were in collusion with Kabila and opposition armed groups.

Arrests that Human Rights Watch documented typically occurred without warning or legal justification. Uniformed Republican Guard members and uniformed police or plainclothes

officers entered homes, sometimes at night. In some instances, they pointed weapons at family members, including a child in at least one instance, and demanded compliance without presenting warrants or explaining charges. They took phones and belongings and blindfolded some people, then took them to CNC offices.

The wife of one detainee said, "Many men, including Republican Guards, forced their way into our home at about 4:30 in the morning.... They pointed their guns at my young son and forced him to show them his father's bedroom." The man, arrested in mid-December, is still in detention.

Congo's Code of Criminal Procedure states that except for cases involving "*flagrant délit*" (being "caught in the act"), arrests should only be made when a competent judicial authority, such as a judge or prosecutor, has issued an arrest warrant stating the charges.

One former detainee, who spent two weeks in CNC detention, said that scores of police arrested him and a colleague outside a bar at a busy intersection in Kinshasa. Several police officers bundled them into vehicles and drove off. When a crowd started to form, the police shot their rifles in the air to disperse it.

While a CNC official told Human Rights Watch in December that only one detainee had requested a lawyer, detainees and their family members contradicted this assertion. "My nephew disappeared [and] we learned [three days later] that he was being held at the CNC headquarters," a detainee's relative said. "We tried to send lawyers to assist him, but they were denied access." Someone with ties to the intelligence community told the family to try to settle the issue on their own "because the CNC does not allow lawyers."

A former detainee said: "I told the officer who wanted to question me to let me speak to my lawyer because it's my right." He said the officer replied: "The law doesn't apply here, the law stays outside the door.... You're here because the other intelligence services failed, so don't even think about a lawyer."

Article 19 of the [2006 Congolese Constitution](#), revised in 2011, explicitly guarantees the right to counsel "at all stages of the criminal procedure, and including the police inquiry and the investigation before trial." Article 14(3) of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) similarly provides for the right to counsel of the person's choice.

Former detainees said that CNC officials accused them during interrogations of plotting against the state. One detainee said: "I was told 'You are here because the other intelligence agencies did not do their work. Why are you fighting against the president?' They accused me of being a supporter of Kabila, but they only had some things from my Facebook account from a few years ago."

Another former detainee said that while he was not beaten or physically mistreated, he was afraid he was going to be killed each time he was blindfolded and moved between detention locations.

The CNC official told Human Rights Watch in November that the National Human Rights Commission was the designated point of contact between the CNC and detainees' families. While some family members were able to contact detained relatives through the commission, the government and the CNC are responsible for locating detainees and ensuring access by their lawyers and relatives, Human Rights Watch said.

Most family members interviewed failed to find their loved ones when they were in CNC detention. Family members of those forcibly disappeared said they had written to local and national authorities, asking for their loved ones' location so they could visit, but received no information.

Some family members eventually confirmed that their relatives were in CNC detention through informal means. "My nephew disappeared on a Wednesday," said one family member. "We searched all the city's prisons without success. It was only three days later when we learned through informal channels that he was being held at the CNC, in the ONATRA [transport agency] building. However, no one confirmed his presence there." The family was only able to verify this information after he was released two weeks later.

Several former detainees said that they were released in a manner almost as arbitrary as their arrest and made to sign declarations that they would not work against the government.

"I was brought into a room and told to sign a document," a former detainee said. "It stated that I would not criticize the president, that I will stop political activism, that I will not disturb the public order, and that I will not talk about my detention at the CNC. I was told that if I break that contract, it will be used against me, and I was told I would not leave if I did not sign it. Even today that document makes me think I'm being followed."

In late 2025 and early 2026, at least five cases were transferred to the public prosecutor's office or the military prosecutor's office. The detainees were sent either to Makala Central Prison or Ndolo military prison to await preliminary hearings. It is unclear whether the unlawful arrests and detention of the defendants will be considered in judicial proceedings.

On January 8, Justice Minister Guillaume Ngefa stated at a [news conference](#) that for arrests related to state security, the Ministry of Justice ensures that procedures are legalized as quickly as possible. He said that administratively, arrests can take time until the completion of investigations. Human Rights Watch did not find that these cases were handled with the necessary regard for due process.

