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Burundi: Attacks by Ruling Party Youth League Members - UN Should Impose Targeted Sanctions

(Nairobi) – Members of the [Burundi](#) ruling party's youth league, the *Imbonerakure*, have brutally killed, tortured, and severely beaten scores of people across the country in recent months, Human Rights Watch said today. The killings and other ill-treatment reflect the widespread impunity for *Imbonerakure* members and the government's unwillingness to prosecute or rein in the group.

Over the past three months, members of the *Imbonerakure*, "those who see far" in Kirundi, the predominant language in Burundi, used clubs to beat to death a 15-year-old boy, drove a knife into the eye of one victim, blinding him, and attacked others with knives, clubs, and wooden poles. The *Imbonerakure* members cut out the eye of another man, then stomped him to death. *Imbonerakure* members have also set up unofficial roadblocks in multiple provinces, sometimes detaining and beating passersby and extorting money or stealing their possessions.

"Burundians live in fear of the next attack, afraid to speak out to denounce the killings, torture, and other abuses," said [Ida Sawyer](#), Central Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "The killers and torturers who carry out violence so freely and the Burundian officials who support them need to know that there are consequences for their actions."

The country has [descended into lawlessness](#) since April 2015, when President Pierre Nkurunziza announced his bid for a disputed third term, despite the two-term limit set forth in the Arusha Accords. The political framework, signed in 2000, was the first of several power-sharing agreements between belligerents intended to end the country's civil war. Government security forces and members of the *Imbonerakure* [cracked down](#) on protesters and critics of Nkurunziza's government.

The country's once vibrant independent media and [nongovernmental organizations](#) have been decimated, and more than 325,000 people have [fled the country](#). In the past year and a half, several hundred people have been killed and others have been [tortured](#) or forcibly disappeared. Armed opposition groups have also attacked security forces and ruling party members, including police and *Imbonerakure*.

The new Human Rights Watch findings are based on interviews conducted since October 2016 with over 20 victims, human rights activists, and others who described a range of abuses committed by *Imbonerakure* members in six of Burundi's provinces. Some victims were interviewed outside the country. Most described incidents that occurred in the last four months, but Human Rights Watch also discovered new victims tortured or ill-treated by *Imbonerakure* earlier in 2016.

Human Rights Watch learned of several additional incidents of abuse, but victims were afraid to speak about what they or family members had suffered. Many said they feared reprisals from ruling party members if they spoke about the abuses.

Since the start of the crisis, police and intelligence agents have frequently used *Imbonerakure* members to identify suspected opponents living in Bujumbura, the capital. Some of those arrested by *Imbonerakure* – who have no legal power to detain people – were later [tortured](#) by security forces.

Witnesses said that while some *Imbonerakure* members are arrested for committing abuses, many are released quickly and never face trial. Victims said judicial officials will often only investigate cases if the person filing the complaint pays a bribe.

Lawyers, witnesses, and magistrates said that politically sensitive cases are often handled by magistrates close to the ruling party. Many people refuse to file judicial complaints against *Imbonerakure* members because they fear them and have lost confidence in the justice system, which they believe is unable to help the victims and may be involved in abuses.

One man said he filed a complaint with the police in February 2016 after two policemen raped his wife. They told him he was “staining the image of the security forces.” After police threatened him and *Imbonerakure* members beat him up, he withdrew the complaint.

The Burundian authorities should immediately and publicly order *Imbonerakure* members to stop illegally detaining, ill-treating, and extorting money from the population, Human Rights Watch said. The Burundian justice system should investigate and prosecute members of the *Imbonerakure* who commit these crimes. The government should also dismantle all illegal roadblocks throughout the country.

In a five-page response to questions from Human Rights Watch, Nancy-Ninette Mutoni, the executive secretary in charge of communication and information for the ruling party, wrote that *Imbonerakure* carry out political activities “calmly and serenely” and do not arrest people. She wrote that the ruling party opposes torture and has not received any complaints about abuses from the population, adding that she is morally outraged by the “dehumanization” of the *Imbonerakure*: “Those [*Imbonerakure*] who transgress are severely sanctioned first of all by the internal laws [of the ruling party] and if necessary, we will resort to penal laws.” She said the accusations of extortion are “pure lies.”

Mutoni said *Imbonerakure* participate in “mixed committees,” consisting of local residents, authorities, administrative officials, and security force members, which are intended to provide security. In these committees, the *Imbonerakure* “not only have the right but also the obligation to do surveillance and to signal all movements and suspect acts to the security forces.”

In recent months, government officials have been attacked by unknown people. On November 28, 2016, gunmen attacked and injured Willy Nyamitwe, the president’s communications adviser, near his home in Bujumbura. On December 31, a gunman shot dead Emmanuel Niyonkuru, Burundi’s environment minister, at his house in Bujumbura. Multiple suspects have been arrested in both cases.

The United Nations Human Rights Council adopted a resolution in September 2016, to establish a [commission of inquiry](#) into human rights violations in Burundi since April 2015, and to determine whether they may constitute international crimes. The commission is also mandated to identify those allegedly responsible with a view to ensuring accountability. Burundian officials have said they will refuse to work with the commission.

In July 2016, the UN Security Council adopted a [resolution](#) authorizing the deployment of 228 unarmed police to Burundi to support UN human rights observers. Burundian authorities have refused the deployment.

The UN Security Council should impose travel bans and asset freezes against individuals responsible for ongoing serious human rights violations in Burundi, Human Rights Watch said. The Security Council should create a panel of experts to identify Burundian officials, whether in government or the opposition, most responsible for summary executions, torture, and other serious human rights abuses since April 2015.

The sanctions framework should include exemptions for humanitarian purposes, and ensure due process to challenge the sanctions, as well as provisions to lift or suspend the sanctions in the event that sanctioned individuals remediate these abuses or Burundi authorities ensure adequate accountability for serious crimes. Asset freezes and travel bans would directly target abusers, and would have no negative effect on the broader Burundian population.

The UN Commission of Inquiry should quickly open its investigation. It should prioritize investigating killings and other abuses by the *Imbonerakure* with a view to identifying members of the *Imbonerakure*, security forces, or ruling party officials most responsible.

In addition, if the [International Criminal Court \(ICC\)](#) finds enough evidence to warrant a full investigation, it should open one as soon as possible and investigate *Imbonerakure* abuses – including anyone in senior positions responsible for planning, assisting or failing to prevent crimes against humanity.

“The UN, the ICC, and Burundi’s regional and international partners should mobilize at the highest levels and take action now to hold those responsible for the serious crimes against Burundians accountable and halt the violence and abuse in Burundi,” Sawyer said.

The *Imbonerakure*

Members of the *Imbonerakure* have been involved in scores of human rights violations in Burundi since at least 2009. In the period before the 2010 elections, which brought Nkurunziza his second term victory amid numerous allegations of fraud, the ruling party used members of the *Imbonerakure* to [intimidate and harass](#) the political opposition, including through street fights with opposition parties’ youth wings.

From 2010 to 2012, *Imbonerakure* members frequently [attacked and threatened](#) current and former members of the National Liberation Forces (*Forces nationales de libération*, FNL), an opposition party, sometimes jointly with members of the intelligence services or the police. The FNL was a former rebel group that became a political party in April 2009. Thousands of former FNL combatants were demobilized in the mid-2000s.

Since the start of the current crisis in April 2015, members of the *Imbonerakure* have arrested, beaten, or attacked FNL members across the country. In May 2016, Human Rights Watch interviewed [victims of rape and sexual violence](#) who said they had recognized members of the *Imbonerakure* who had raped them. Some women were targeted because their husbands or male relatives were members of opposition parties such as the FNL.

Following a clash between the Burundian army and members of an unknown armed group between December 30, 2014, and January 3, 2015, *Imbonerakure* members, Burundian soldiers and police officers committed at least 47 [extrajudicial executions](#) of members of the armed group, some of whom had surrendered.

Imbonerakure members actively participated in the killings, some using machetes. Witnesses said that during the clashes, police and soldiers transported *Imbonerakure* members in government vehicles and provided them with weapons. Witnesses also said they saw *Imbonerakure* members tie up, beat, or kill captured men from the armed group in various areas in Murwi commune in Cibitoke province.

Imbonerakure members have become increasingly powerful in some provinces in recent months. Some members collaborate closely with the national intelligence service (Service national de renseignement, SNR), arresting perceived opponents, beating them, and transferring them to intelligence agency offices. *Imbonerakure* members have at times worn police or military uniforms, carried weapons, and operated side by side with the police or military. In parts of the country, witnesses said some members of the *Imbonerakure* are more powerful than the police, who do not intervene even when they know that *Imbonerakure* members [torture, arrest, and ill-treat residents](#).

Victims from opposition parties said that they or others perceived to be against the ruling party or Nkurunziza’s third term have been taken to official or unofficial detention centers where they were tortured or beaten by *Imbonerakure* members or policemen with wooden rods, belts, and other objects.

Imbonerakure members have also set up makeshift roadblocks on main and secondary roads in several provinces, including Kirundo, Makamba, Muyinga, Muramvya, Ruyigi, and Ngozi, detained passersby, extorted money or valuables, and sometimes beat them. Some victims said *Imbonerakure* members accused them of collaborating with opposition groups. In other cases, it was unclear why they were targeted.

Imbonerakure members have also targeted Burundians fleeing to Tanzanian refugee camps, demanding bribes before they cross the border, and if they couldn’t pay, they stole their belongings. Burundian human rights activists and residents told Human Rights Watch that *Imbonerakure* members have also conducted night patrols in many provinces and imposed unofficial curfews on local residents.

Recent Killings by *Imbonerakure* Members

Just before midnight on November 19, a group of about 10 young men and boys were walking home from watching a soccer match on TV in Gihanga commune in Bubanza province. A group of about 12 *Imbonerakure* armed with clubs confronted the group and told them to lie face down on the ground. It is unclear why they were stopped, but residents said the *Imbonerakure* in the commune had imposed an unofficial curfew at 7 p.m. in Gihanga. A member of the group said:

When we were lying down on our stomachs, they started to say: “We are going to beat you, you dogs, you criminals.” Then they beat us for about 10 minutes. They beat us haphazardly, each one of them beat who he wanted. After 10 minutes, we heard their leader come and say, “Beat

these criminals.” When we heard his voice, we knew things would not be easy; he’s known for the harm he does to people in the village. We decided to flee and everyone ran in a different direction.

One member of the group, a 15-year-old student named Faustin Niyonsaba, didn’t escape. He was later found semi-conscious, dumped in front of his house. Niyonsaba was taken to a local health clinic and then to a hospital in Bujumbura. He died the next morning. A witness who saw Niyonsaba later on the night of the attack described his injuries:

He was covered in blood. He tried to say a few words but couldn’t. He had serious wounds on his back, and I suppose he died because of the blows to the head by the rods [used to beat him]. He didn’t have any [open] wounds [on his head] but it was swollen in several places.

After the incident, police arrested at least nine men, one of whom was the local leader of the *Imbonerakure*. He was later released without charge. A group of residents confronted police officials regarding the man’s release. Police fired shots into the air to disperse the crowd, allegedly injuring at least two people. Four *Imbonerakure* suspected of involvement in the attack on Niyonsaba remain in detention.

On October 29, a theft occurred in a rural area in one of Burundi’s northern provinces. A witness said that a local village official had asked members of the *Imbonerakure* to hunt for the culprits. The *Imbonerakure* members then detained and beat a man in his mid-20s with wooden rods. The man later escaped and sought refuge in a nearby house with at least four other people, the witness said. The owner of the house saw about 50 *Imbonerakure* carrying wooden rods approaching the house so he locked the door. Soon, more *Imbonerakure* arrived outside the house along with a policeman and a village official. When the policeman asked the home owner to open the door, he complied. They arrested two people who were hiding in the house, including the man who had been beaten earlier. They were tied up and taken to the police post.

Another man who stayed behind in the house described what happened next:

The rest of us stayed at the house thinking that it was over. But 30 minutes later, a small team of *Imbonerakure* came and tied me up along with [name withheld], and they took us to the police office. It was like a hunt for the opposition because we are members of the FNL. They left us there saying they were going to look for other people to arrest. They told us: “We are going to correct you.”

[The two detainees who were arrested before us] were already in a bad state. They were visibly swollen, especially on their arms, but I didn’t really have time to look them over well because it was my turn to be beaten.

They beat us all over and an *Imbonerakure* called [name withheld], took a dagger, and pierced the eye of [name withheld], saying, “next time, you will see far.” [A local authority] as well as an *Imbonerakure* then stomped on his stomach until he died. We spent the night with his body in the same room.

Another witness who saw the body the following day said:

[He] had injuries all over, but it was like the flesh on his legs and part of his calves had been cut with a knife. His eye had come out.

Witnesses said a local official told a member of the deceased’s family that if he didn’t bury the body, he would be imprisoned. One person familiar with the incident said that four people allegedly involved in the killing had been detained and sent to a regional prison. The family of the deceased continues to be threatened by members of the *Imbonerakure*, who say that if the four suspects aren’t released the family “will see what happens to them.” Human Rights Watch was unable to confirm the detention of the four suspects.

Torture and Other Recent Abuses by *Imbonerakure* Members

In a village south of Bujumbura, a 32-year old mason said that three members of the *Imbonerakure*, including his neighbor, attacked him in his house on November 23:

They forced open the door by throwing a big rock at it. My family and I had been asleep for at least two hours. When they came in, they ordered me to lie down on the floor and they were going to “show” me. I understood that my time was up, and I started to defend myself.

[My neighbor] stayed outside the house and entered when he saw that I was resisting. I fought them. The clubs [they had] were made from dried wood, at least a meter long and 6 centimeters thick. They were well made. I know a lot about dimensions because I’m a mason.

The victim, an FNL member, said that he didn't know what provoked the attack. The neighbor involved in the assault had insulted him in 2015 during the pre-electoral campaign period, calling him *umukeba*, a derogatory word in Kirundi meaning opponent of the government.

Officials arrested three of the alleged attackers, but released them all before the pretrial hearing.

Two witnesses said that three *Imbonerakure*, armed with long wooden poles and knives, stole a man's phone at a roadblock in September. He and another man returned to the roadblock to recover the phone and were beaten by *Imbonerakure* who accused them of attacking the roadblock.

One of the men said:

When [*Imbonerakure* members] saw us, they ordered us to stop where we were and lie face down on the ground. They started to beat me on the rear end and the legs. They told us that we had attacked their camp. The next day, we filed a complaint. The judicial police officer brought us together and told [the *Imbonerakure*] to ask us for forgiveness. I was unable to sit down for several days because I was swollen where they beat me.

The *Imbonerakure* members responsible for the incident spent one night in the local detention center and were then released.

A 40-year-old former soldier said that a member of the *Imbonerakure* and police arrested him on September 11 in Bujumbura and took him to Kamenge neighborhood, where he was held in a shipping container with several other men. They accused him of leaking information to Burundians in Rwanda. The former soldier said:

They took my telephone, tied me up, and stole my money. There were a lot of people [in the container]. There were people from the [opposition political parties] FNL, MSD [Movement for Solidarity and Democracy], and Tutsis and Hutus against [Nkurunziza's] third term. They tortured me there. They beat me with rods and ropes, also with a bicycle lock. They beat us at 6 a.m., 2 p.m., and 9 p.m. I was there for four days. They only gave us leftover food from the police and water that had been sitting under the sun. They beat me because they found information on my phone from [online radio stations based in Rwanda] Humura and Inzamba and the WhatsApp contacts of former colleagues [in the army].

The victim said that a sympathetic policeman who knew him listened to his story and released him at night after four days of detention.

In June, *Imbonerakure* members, police, and soldiers abducted a 32-year-old man from the capital, Bujumbura. They put a hood over him, beat him on the head, cut him with a knife multiple times on his back, and stabbed him in the eye. He was badly injured on his head and back and blinded in one eye. He paid medical staff to not reveal the hospital in which they were treating him so *Imbonerakure* members or security forces would not find him.