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World Report 2023



Uganda

Events of 2022

Ugandan riot police surround veteran Ugandan opposition leader Kizza Besigye's vehicle during a protest against soaring consumer prices in Kampala, May 24, 2022.

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Authorities in Uganda, as in previous years, failed to hold security forces accountable for serious human rights abuses. The police and the military, which were implicated in serious rights violations around the 2021 general elections, continued to restrict rights to freedom of expression and assembly, especially for government critics and political opposition. The authorities placed restrictions on civil society organizations, media, and online communication, as state agents routinely harassed and intimidated journalists.

Conduct of Security Forces

In December 2021, Uganda [sent Uganda People's Defence Force \(UPDF\) soldiers into eastern Democratic Republic of Congo](#) as part of a joint operation with the Congolese army in an assault on the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) rebel group. The government claimed the ADF was responsible for the November 16, 2021, suicide bombings in Kampala that killed four people and wounded 37.

UPDF soldiers and police in April [killed at least 11 people](#) as part of a disarmament operation that began in March.

Freedom of Expression and Assembly

Authorities clamped down on journalists and government critics and placed further restrictions on social media.

On December 28, 2021, military officers [broke into the home of government critic and satirical writer, Kakwenza Rukirabashaija](#), beat him, and took him to an unknown location where they detained him for 14 days. Police later charged Rukirabashaija with “offensive communication” over earlier tweets critical of President Yoweri Museveni and his son, Muhoozi Kainerugaba. On February 9, Rukirabashaija fled Uganda to seek treatment for the injuries he sustained from beatings in detention. Two days before he fled the country, a Kampala court turned down his application to have his passport returned.

On February 22, a security official [kicked freelance journalist](#), Lawrence Kitatta, as he covered an opposition protest in Kampala outside the home of Anita Among, the then deputy speaker of parliament. Kitatta told the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) he was forced into hiding and unable to work for days due to fear. He said he was tailed at an office at which he worked by unknown people [suspected to be government security officers](#).

On March 10, a group of armed police and military officers [raided the offices of The Alternative DigiTalk](#), an online television station, in Kampala, arrested nine staff members, and confiscated their equipment. On March 15 and 16, seven of the nine were released on police bond, while Norman Tumuhimbise and Faridah Bikobere were remanded at Luzira prison and later charged with cyberstalking and offensive communication “to disturb the peace and quiet of the President of Uganda.” The charges resulted from their sharing excerpts of Tumuhimbise’s two books that are critical of President Museveni. On March 21, police [released Tumuhimbise and Bikobere](#) on bail.

On September 8, parliament [amended the 2011 Computer Misuse Act](#), further restricting freedom of expression online. According to the new law, a “person who uses social media to publish, distribute or share information, prohibited under the laws of Uganda or using disguised or false identity, commits an offence,” and would be subjected to either a fine of 16 million Uganda shillings (around US\$4,200), five years in jail, or both.

On October 4, police [arrested nine university students](#) protesting the building of the East Africa Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) through Uganda, outside the European Union offices in Kampala, and charged them with being a “common nuisance.” The nine were released on bail on October 10.

Attacks on Civil Society Groups

On May 10, the Ugandan High Court [overturned the suspension of Chapter Four](#), a legal aid organization. On August 10, 2021, the National Bureau for Non-governmental Organizations indefinitely suspended 54 civil society groups, including Chapter Four, on a range of grounds, including allegedly operating with expired permits. The bureau accused Chapter Four of failing to file annual returns and audited books of accounts.

On June 22, President Museveni announced [the restoration of the Democratic Governance Facility](#), an EU fund for nongovernmental organizations, on condition that the government is included in its decision-making on the disbursement of funds to Ugandan organizations. The president suspended the fund in 2021.

Arrest and Harassment of Opposition Leaders and Supporters

On May 23, police arrested Kizza Besigye, an opposition politician and leader of the Red Card Front movement, at a rally in Kampala protesting the government’s handling of increases in fuel prices and other basic commodities. On May 25, authorities charged Besigye with inciting violence

and granted him a 30 million Uganda shillings (about \$8,100) cash bail. Besigye refused to pay because he considered it excessive and politically motivated. Two weeks later, on June 6, authorities released Besigye after the High Court reduced the cash bail to three million Uganda shillings (\$810). On June 12, police arrested Besigye again at a rally in Kampala and charged him with inciting violence. A court initially denied, but later granted, his bail application; Besigye was released on bail on July 1.

On May 30, police [arrested six other opposition leaders](#), including parliamentarian Anna Adek; Doreen Nyanjura, the deputy mayor of Kampala; and four activists, Wokuri Mudanda, Susan Nanyojo, Mariam Kizito, and Alice Amony, as they protested the continued detention of Besigye, but later released them on bail.

On May 25, soldiers [raided the offices of the Forum for Democratic Change](#) (FDC), an opposition political party, assaulted its officials, stole money, confiscated documents, and arrested at least two of them. This was on the eve of the by-election in Omoro County in Northern Uganda, which was triggered by the death of Jacob Oulanyah, the former area parliamentarian. The next day, security officers arrested several other supporters of FDC and other opposition parties.

A year after their arrests, opposition parliamentarians Mohammad Ssegirinya and Allan Ssewanyana of the National Unity Platform [remained in detention without trial](#). On September 24 and 27, 2021, armed men presumed to be government security officers [arbitrarily re-arrested both Ssewanyana and Ssegirinya](#) after they were separately granted bail on murder and terrorism-related charges and released from prison, bundled them into unmarked vehicles, and drove them to unknown destinations. On September 28, 2021, police presented them at court in Masaka, where they were charged with new murder charges and remanded.

Land Rights

Ugandan media reported that [between June 2 and 5](#), violent clashes between unknown people and residents occurred in the northern village of Apaa that left six people dead, three critically injured, and over 200 houses burned. The area has been plagued by a decade-long dispute between the government and the communities during which authorities have [forcibly evicted Apaa residents](#), claiming the area is part of wildlife and forestry reserves. Security officers have burned homes, beat people, and looted property during the evictions. Officials blocked access to Apaa for outsiders for three years, closed a health center and market serving the area, and [excluded residents from participating in the 2021 general elections](#).

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Uganda's penal code punishes "carnal knowledge" between people of the same gender with up to life in prison. On August 3, Uganda's National Bureau for NGOs banned Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG), a prominent lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights organization, for not having officially registered with it. SMUG's director told Human Rights Watch that the registration bureau refused to approve SMUG's name, a requirement for registration, because the name of the organization makes it clear that it supports rights and wellbeing of LGBT people. SMUG had provided education on sexuality and advocated for health services for LGBT people since 2004.

Accountability for International Crimes

Reparation proceedings continued before the International Criminal Court (ICC) in the case of Dominic Ongwen, a former commander of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Ongwen was convicted in 2021 of war crimes and crimes against humanity; an appeal is pending. Joseph Kony,

the LRA's founding leader and the only living remaining ICC suspect of LRA crimes, remains a fugitive.

Uganda's International Crimes Division continued its trial, which has dragged on for 13 years, against LRA commander Thomas Kwoyelo. At time of writing, the most recent hearing was in June. Kwoyelo has been in prison since he was captured by Ugandan forces in 2009.

Wider accountability for crimes committed during the 25-year conflict in northern Uganda, including abuses by the Ugandan armed forces during the conflict, remains limited. The Ugandan army has said that soldiers who committed abuses have been prosecuted and convicted but has not provided details of such cases.

Children's Rights

Uganda's teenage pregnancy rate stands at 25 percent—the highest in East Africa. One in four Ugandan girls and women ages 15-19 have given birth before turning 18, and 34 percent of girls are married before the age of 18. Uganda maintains a “re-entry” policy framework that [specifies that girls may return to school after giving birth](#), but presents additional barriers and conditions for return. Regulations state that girls are required to go on mandatory maternity leave when they are three months' pregnant. They are only allowed to resume schooling after one year, when their child is at least six months old, regardless of their personal situation.

In June, the government adopted its second five-year [National Strategy to End Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy](#), pledging key measures to end both, including enforcing compulsory education of all children for at least 11 years, and facilitating adolescent mothers' return to school.