

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	421
Land:	Uganda
Kilde:	OMCT
Titel:	Uganda: Harassment against defenders and organisations in the country's oil region
Udgivet:	25. oktober 2021
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	27. januar 2022

Uganda

25.10.21

URGENT INTERVENTIONS

Uganda: Harassment against defenders and organisations in the country's oil region

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- /
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- /
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Uganda

October 23, 2021

The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, a partnership of FIDH and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), requests your urgent intervention in the following situation in **Uganda**.

Description of the situation:

The Observatory has been informed about the judicial harassment and acts of intimidation by the police of Uganda against several human rights organisations working on oil and gas issues as well as the arrest of several human rights defenders working in the same field.

On October 7, 2021, Hoima field officer of the African Institute for Energy Governance (AFIEGO) [\[1\]](#) was summoned to the Hoima central police station and warned not to reopen the AFIEGO office in Buliisa. On the same day, the director of the Buliisa police went to AFIEGO's local office in Buliisa, which is also the headquarter of two other organisations, Navigators Of Development Association (NAVODA) [\[2\]](#) and the Oil and Gas Human Rights Defenders Association (OGHRA), and took pictures of the premises.

On October 8, 2021, around 20 police officers raided the office of the three organisations in Buliisa, requiring their members to close down and leave the premises within two hours, on the grounds that AFIEGO has been [suspended](#) since August 2021 by the National Bureau for Non-Governmental Organisations of Uganda (NGO Bureau) and that NAVODA did not have a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the local authorities. Both organisations contend that these are false pretexts used to deter them from carrying out their legitimate activities : NAVODA maintains that the organisation has an MoU still valid for three years; AFIEGO that it is registered with the Uganda Registration Services Bureau (URSB) as a company limited by guarantee and thus does not fall under the NGO Bureau's jurisdiction. As a result of the raid, **Maxwell Atuhura**, the head of AFIEGO's Buliisa office, removed the computers and most of the equipment from the premises and all the members left the office. At the end of the day, AFIEGO members learned that the police intended to arrest Maxwell Atuhura as well as several volunteers and observers of the organisation because there were still some equipment in the office and a signpost outside.

On October 14, 2021, **Joss Kaheero Mugisa**, chairperson of OGHRA, a community-based organisation, paralegal for the Ugandan Law Society and observer for AFIEGO Buliisa, who was present at AFIEGO's premises on October 8, was arrested under accusations of threats of violence and verbal abuse within a family context. M. Mugisa was released on bond on October 9, 2021, before being rearrested on October 19, 2021 and deferred to a judge on October 20, 2021 who remanded him into custody at the Massindi prison until November 10, 2021. He was charged with two counts of "threatening violence" against two women of his family and one count of "threatening to destroy their house". Joss Kaheero Mugisa denies such accusations as does another witness.

On October 22, 2021, **Robert Birimuye**, an East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) Project Affected People (PAP) leader from Kyotera district, Massaka region, was arrested by the Kyotera district police commander during a meeting of PAPs organised by a Member of Parliament for Kyotera district, in Luseese Village, Nabigasa Sub-county, Kyotera District. He was accused of disturbing the EACOP project by challenging the assessments and compensations he considers unfair, working with an unregistered organisation in the district and trying to sabotage the government project, and was detained at the Kyotera City Police Station. Mr. Birimuye was

released on bond a few hours later as investigations against him on charges of “inciting violence, sabotage of government programmes and unlawful assembly” are ongoing.

Later on October 22, 2021, six AFIEGO members, namely **Dickens Kamugisha**, CEO; **Rachael Amongin**, assistant communications officer; **Catherine Twongyeirwe**, finance and administration assistant; **Mercy Nuwamanya**, front desk officer, **Patrick Edema** and **Paul Kato**, research associates, were arrested by the police. At the time of publication of this Urgent Appeal, the six human rights defenders were being detained at the Kiira police station and the charges against them were unknown.

The Observatory recalls that AFIEGO, together with 53 other civil society organisations, got unduly **suspended** by the NGO Bureau on August 20, 2021, on the grounds that the organisations were allegedly found to be “non-compliant with the NGO Act, 2016”.

The Observatory further recalls that members of AFIEGO and of other civil society organisations, as well as journalists and members of affected communities, have been harassed and their members arbitrarily detained on multiple occasions because of their roles as human rights and environmental defenders or for documenting violations **in the oil and gas sector**. For example, on May 26, 2021, Maxwell Atuhura was **arbitrarily arrested** while conducting a fieldwork to interview communities affected by the Tilenga project, developed by the French oil company Total and the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC).

The Observatory expresses its utmost concern over these arrests, acts of judicial harassment and intimidation against AFIEGO, NAVODA, OGHRA and their members, which seem to be only aimed at punishing them for their legitimate human rights activities. The Observatory underlines that these acts are part of an intensifying pattern of intimidation and judicial harassment that NGOs and civil society, and particularly those working in the oil and gas sector, have been facing for several years in Uganda.

Based on the information received, the Observatory fears that the forced closure of AFIEGO, NAVODA and OGHRA could be followed by yet more acts of intimidation and harassment, against other human rights defenders, some of whom are actively sought by the police.

The Observatory calls on the Ugandan authorities to immediately release the above-mentioned human rights defenders and to put an end to any act of intimidation and harassment, including at the judicial level, against the members of AFIEGO, NAVODA and OGHRA, as well as against all human rights defenders in the country.

Actions requested:

Please write to the authorities of Uganda asking them to:

- i. Guarantee in all circumstances the physical integrity and psychological well-being of all human rights defenders in Uganda, and ensure in all circumstances that they are able to carry out their legitimate activities without any hindrance and fear of reprisals;

ii. Immediately and unconditionally release Dickens Kamugisha, Rachael Amongin, Catherine Twongyeirwe, Mercy Nuwamanya, Patrick Edema and Paul Kato , since their detention is arbitrary as it seems to be merely aimed at punishing them for their human rights activities;

iii. Release Joss Kaheero Mugisa pending trial and guarantee his right to a fair trial;

iv. Put an immediate end to all acts of harassment - including at the judicial level - against all human rights organisations, as well as all human rights defenders in Uganda;

v. Immediately cancel the decision of the NGO Bureau to suspend the activities of the 54 organisations in Uganda, which contravenes the right to freedom of association;

vi. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the right to freedom of association and expression in the country, in accordance with relevant international and regional human rights standards, in particular Articles 19 and 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Addresses:

- Mr. Kaguta Yoweri Museveni, President of the Republic of Uganda, E-mail: museveni@starcom.co.ug / aak@statehouse.go.ug
- Mr. William Byaruhanga, Attorney General, and Hon. Ephraim Kamuntu, Minister of Justice and Constitutional Affairs of Uganda, E-Mail: mojca@africaonline.co.ug
- Ms. Jane Frances Abodo, Director of Public Prosecutions, Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs of Uganda, Email: admin@dpp.go.ug
- Dr. Katebalirwe Amooti, Acting Chairperson, Uganda Human Rights Commission, Email: uhrc@uhrc.ug
- H.E. Christopher Onyanga Aparr, Permanent Mission of Uganda to the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland. Email: mission.uganda@ties.itu.int
- H.E. Mirjam Blaak Sow, Embassy of Uganda to the EU in Brussels, Belgium. Email: ugembrus@brutele.be, info@ugandamission-benelux.org

Please write to oil companies TotalEnergies and CNOOC, which operate in the region, to use their leverage – and if needed, to take all necessary measures to increase their leverage – so authorities take the measures requested above:

TotalEnergies, Email: ep.tepuinfo@totalenergies.com

Please also write to the diplomatic representations of Uganda in your respective countries.

Paris-Geneva, October 23, 2021

Kindly inform us of any action undertaken quoting the code of this appeal in your reply.

The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (the Observatory) was created in 1997 by FIDH and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT). The objective of this programme is to prevent or remedy situations of repression against human rights defenders. FIDH

and OMCT are both members of [ProtectDefenders.eu](https://www.protectdefenders.eu), the European Union Human Rights Defenders Mechanism implemented by international civil society.

To contact the Observatory, call the emergency line:
· E-mail: Appeals@fidh-omct.org
· Tel FIDH: +33 (0) 1 43 55 25 18
· Tel OMCT: +41 (0) 22 809 49 39

[1] The African Institute for Energy Governance (AFIEGO) is a public policy research and advocacy company limited by guarantee dedicated to influencing energy policies to benefit the poor and vulnerable people. AFIEGO works with communities and leaders to ensure that clean energy resources are used in a way that promotes equitable development, environmental conservation and respect for human rights.

[2] The Navigators Of Development Association (NAVODA) is a NGO based in Hoima District which envisions socio-economic transformation of communities through conservation of the environment and other natural resources