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Burundi: Suspected Opponents Killed, Detained, Tortured

Security Force Abuses Deepen Insecurity

(Nairobi) – [Burundi](#)’s national intelligence services, police, and ruling party youth members have killed, arbitrarily detained, tortured and harassed people suspected of belonging to opposition parties or of working with armed opposition groups, Human Rights Watch said today.

The authorities have responded to attacks on both civilians and state agents by armed assailants or suspected rebel group members in various parts of the country with a heavy handed approach. They have shown little regard for credible investigations, objective evidence, or due process needed to hold those actually responsible to account. Instead, in Cibitoke and Kayanza provinces – the focus of the new research – the authorities have targeted perceived opponents of the ruling National Council for the Defense of Democracy-Forces for the Defense of Democracy (Conseil national pour la défense de la démocratie-Forces pour la défense de la démocratie, CNDD-FDD).

“Instead of targeting perceived opponents, President Évariste Ndayishimiye’s administration should focus on bringing those responsible for abuse to justice, including members of the security forces,” said [Clémentine de Montjoye](#), Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. “Burundians will only stop living in fear when their tormentors are held to account.”

Between October 2021 and April 2022, Human Rights Watch interviewed more than 30 people, including victims and witnesses of violations, family members, opposition party representatives, and Burundian human rights defenders. Human Rights Watch also analyzed and authenticated footage showing several army and police officers admitting to killings. Human Rights Watch also reviewed the reports of [local](#) and [international](#) human rights organizations, media reports, public speeches of government officials, and social media posts.

Given the large scale of the abuses and the lack of access for human rights organizations in the region, this research may cover only a fraction of the rights violations taking place. Local media and Burundian human rights groups have also published accounts of abuses across the country.

Human Rights Watch found, in the two provinces, that impunity for the killings, torture, and other abuses is exacerbating, rather than reducing, the insecurity affecting communities.

In two cases investigated, security forces may have forcibly disappeared a person they arrested. A person is forcibly disappeared when they are detained by the authorities, followed by a refusal to disclose their circumstances or whereabouts, for the purpose of removing the person from protection of the law for a prolonged period.

Family members of victims said they were afraid to ask about their relatives’ situation or to visit police stations and intelligence detention facilities to look for them. In some cases, family members did submit complaints to the local authorities, but said they received no information about their missing relatives. Some families assume their loved ones have been killed and have stopped searching for them.

A 25-year-old member of the National Congress for Freedom (Congrès national pour la liberté, CNL), Burundi’s main opposition party, has not been heard from since January 27, when he received a phone call and went to meet with a local member of the Imbonerakure, the ruling party’s youth league, in Mugina commune, Cibitoke province, a possible enforced disappearance. The relative said that four armed men wearing police uniforms came out of a four-wheel drive vehicle known to belong to the national intelligence service (Service national de renseignement, SNR) in Cibitoke. They took his relative away in the vehicle.

“An Imbonerakure member had been telling him to leave [the CNL] and join the ruling party,” the family member said. After searching for him in all of the local detention cells and police stations, where authorities denied having him in custody, the relative said, he gave up: “I am worried that he is dead. This is what happens here when people don’t speak the same language as the government. I know you can’t bring him back but please at least tell the world what is happening.”

On April 28, Pierre Nkurikiye, the spokesperson for the Interior, Public Security and Community Development Ministry, [told the media](#) that in cases of alleged disappearances, family members should make a complaint to judicial

or administrative authorities so that they can investigate.

In at least two cases Human Rights Watch documented, families or victims reported that local authorities intervened to have people released or to put an end to the harassment of victims. However, to the best of Human Rights Watch’s knowledge, the authorities did not initiate a credible investigation for the cases documented, make any findings public, or hold those responsible to account.

On May 9, Human Rights Watch wrote to Burundi’s foreign affairs minister, justice minister, and the president of the country’s national human rights commission, to share information and ask questions about the cases Human Rights Watch documented, but the officials have not responded.

Despite overwhelming evidence of persistent and serious abuses in Burundi, the European Union, the United States, and other international partners have [pursued a policy of rapprochement with the authorities](#), lifting restrictive measures and sanctions since Ndayishimiye came to power in 2020. The EU is scheduled to resume its political dialogue with the Burundian government in May.

Governments and regional and international institutions engaging with Burundi should ensure that serious human rights violations, such as killings, possible enforced disappearances, torture, and arbitrary detention of political opponents, are on the agenda and that concrete and measurable actions are proposed to address them, Human Rights Watch said.

“The international community’s positive portrayal of Burundi’s human rights situation is out of sync with the level of mistrust and fear Burundians experience toward state institutions and security forces,” de Montjoye said. “If Burundi’s partners truly want to see progress toward restoring the rule of law they should emphasize the importance of tackling impunity for these grave abuses.”

For more details about the findings in Cibitoke and Kayanza provinces, please see below.

Documenting human rights violations in Burundi remains difficult due to restricted access to the country for international human rights organizations, security risks for Burundian activists, and fear by victims and witnesses of retaliation by the authorities. Most of the interviews with people in Cibitoke and Kayanza provinces were conducted by phone. All witnesses spoke on condition of anonymity.

Kayanza province

Security forces and ruling party youths respond with new abuses to deadly attacks on civilians or state agents, often by unidentified armed assailants, Human Rights Watch found. Matongo commune, which borders the Kibira forest, has experienced insecurity in recent years that have left the population on edge.

A series of attacks took place in several provinces of Burundi in 2020 and 2021. In September 2020, at least six civilians were killed and three wounded in an attack in Matongo commune, Kayanza province, attributed to an unidentified armed group, [a local administrator](#) said. Local residents [continued to report](#) and express fear about the presence of armed men in or around the Kibira forest, and increasing repression targeting members of the CNL opposition party.

The authorities rarely conducted transparent investigations with publicly available findings into these attacks, which have left dozens of civilians dead in recent years. The authorities instead generally have cracked down on those suspected of being members of the armed assailants or more broadly suspected of opposing the government, regardless of whether they had links with the assailants or the attacks.

In one example, [Tony Germain Nkina](#), a lawyer and former human rights defender, was arrested in Kabarore, Kayanza province, on October 13, 2020, while visiting a client, around the time of [attacks by armed groups](#) in the area. In a politicized trial, he was charged with and convicted of collaborating with the RED-Tabara (Résistance pour un état de droit au Burundi; Resistance for the Rule of Law in Burundi), a Burundian rebel group operating in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The prosecution presented no evidence to substantiate these allegations. And the outcome of the case appears to be another example of [political interference in the judiciary](#) to put pressure on those associated with the human rights movement.

Nkina’s arrest and prosecution is emblematic of how the authorities’ efforts to seek out perpetrators of armed groups or attacks have resulted in serious human rights violations, including against people who have no links with these armed groups, Human Rights Watch said. The speed with which some suspects were apprehended and put on trial, and the wide net cast by the authorities, also raises questions about the evidence used to identify potential suspects. Meanwhile the ongoing insecurity affecting local populations is largely unaddressed.

Human Rights Watch received video footage showing two army officers bragging about killing suspected “rebels.” While discussing a November 10, 2021, operation against a group of 17 alleged “rebels” who were based out of the Kibira forest, one officer discussed the killing of three people including a leader known as “Mwarabu.”

“The others were killed in the Kibira ... by shooting them, by arresting them,” the officer said. “Of the four that were left, we killed three and there was one left. We took a photo of him on WhatsApp sitting amid the bodies....” Photos showing three dead bodies and one prisoner, surrounded by men wearing military or police clothing, were [published by an independent media outlet in Burundi](#).

Human Rights Watch received video footage of witnesses discussing the killings, and interviewed two residents. The footage and the interviews indicate that three suspected “rebels” were killed and a fourth was arrested on November 10. It is unclear whether the victims were armed at the time of their deaths. One alleged “rebel” threw a grenade and injured a local official and a policeman, media [reported](#). But witnesses who were there said the members of the group were unarmed and had hidden their weapons in a nearby tea plantation.

Based on [a report from a media outlet in Burundi](#) and a local resident, the person who was arrested was convicted two days later in an expedited trial and sentenced to life in prison in proceedings that raise concerns about fairness. The media report and a person who witnessed the proceedings said that the suspect admitted to having been recruited by “Mwarabu” and said the group was responsible for attacks in Bugarama commune in Rumonge province, and Bukeye commune in Muramvya province. The army officer said in the video Human Rights Watch reviewed that several “important people” were arrested through contacts obtained from “Mwarabu”’s phone.

On November 16, 2021, Imbonerakure members and local administrators took Innocent Barutwanayo, a member of the CNL, into custody in Matongo commune. A CNL party representative who followed his case said that Barutwanayo was accused of working with “Mwarabu.”

Barutwanayo was taken first to the Matongo commune office, then transferred to an intelligence service detention cell and then a local police station, said people close to him and other [reports](#). He was tortured, said a person who saw him in Kayanza hospital, after he was transferred there, apparently due to the serious injuries he suffered in detention.

Several national intelligence and police officers took him from the hospital, and transferred him to the intelligence service headquarters in Bujumbura around November 25. A local administrator informed family members on December 3 that they should collect his body at Prince Louis Rwagasore hospital’s morgue in Bujumbura. They have not had the funds to do so.

The national human rights commission (Commission Nationale Indépendante des Droits de l’Homme du Burundi, CNIDH) said in its [2021 annual report](#) that it had recorded the case of “I.B.,” who was taken into custody on November 16 in Kayanza, and later died of injuries from “serious beatings.” The commission said that the Matongo commune administrator said the victim was beaten by the population. However, this claim contradicts information received by Human Rights Watch from witnesses present at the time of Barutwanayo’s arrest.

In addition, a source who saw him while he was hospitalized at Kayanza hospital, in custody of intelligence and police agents, said he had been severely beaten on the buttocks, ribs and chest, and could barely sit due to the severity of his injuries. The commission also said that investigations were ongoing, and in December 2021, [announced](#) it had investigated two cases of torture and that those responsible were being held to account, without identifying the victims or the perpetrators. Human Rights Watch raised Barutwanayo’s case in its letters to the authorities and the commission, and requested information on steps taken to ensure those responsible are held accountable, but has received no response.

In the last six months, Human Rights Watch has documented several other detentions, disappearances, and killings of opposition members in Kayanza province. Claude Nzeyimana, an opposition member, in Rango commune, Kayanza province, was reportedly killed in October 2021.

Family members told Human Rights Watch that witnesses told them that, as he was walking home late one afternoon, three armed men wearing police uniforms, who were using the car of a provincial ruling party representative, detained him. Hours later, a relative said, a neighbor found Nzeyimana’s body on her way back from town. A source who saw the body said that he had three bullet wounds in his head, entering from his forehead and exiting from the back of his head, suggesting he was executed.

Human Rights Watch received information on the apparent disappearance of at least two other CNL opposition party members in Kayanza province, but has not been able to independently confirm the circumstances of how they were reported missing, their subsequent whereabouts, or what happened to them.

Cibitoke Province

Cibitoke province experiences high rates of human rights violations, according to [local monitoring groups](#). The security situation worsened after [attacks by armed groups](#) in 2021 were reported in Cibitoke and other provinces along Burundi’s borders with the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda. Human Rights Watch has [documented](#) multiple cases of people suspected of working with armed groups who were detained and tortured in a security service detention cell in Cibitoke.

Since August 2020, many witnesses, including farmers working along the banks of the Rusizi river, have [described](#) seeing dead bodies by the river, sometimes with bullet or knife wounds, bruises, or with their hands tied behind their

backs with rope. In many cases, witnesses who were there when bodies were discovered said that local administrative officials, Imbonerakure members, or police officers buried the bodies without investigating or taking steps to determine their identities so that their families could be informed.

A Buganda commune resident said he found his neighbor’s body on November 3, 2021. He said it was unclear how the victim had died, but that finding bodies had become a frequent occurrence. “At night, Imbonerakure members attack people and sometimes kill them,” he said in November. “Last week, I saw six bodies floating down the Rusizi river. They were tied together with a mosquito net.”

Speaking about the role of the Imbonerakure and the army along the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo in Cibitoke province, a police officer who was posted there for several years said in a video that Human Rights Watch received and authenticated in March: “If they arrest people trying to cross [the Rusizi river], in most cases they’ll be taken straight to national intelligence.... If they decide to kill, it’s because there’s strong reasons to do so....”

The national intelligence services run a [well-known detention facility](#) in Cibitoke, where people suspected of working with armed groups are held, local residents said. A farmer and member of the opposition party from Cibitoke said he was detained at his house by men wearing ruling party t-shirts around 9 p.m. on February 12, 2022, in a case that could amount to an enforced disappearance. He said that when he saw the t-shirts, “that’s when I understood they were Imbonerakure members. There were also SNR agents present. When I got into the car, they blindfolded me and then I knew my life was in danger.” He was taken to a detention facility he believed to be the security agency’s detention cell in Cibitoke. Human Rights Watch previously [documented](#) multiple cases of torture there. He said:

I was put into a small room alone. I was never around anyone else during those two weeks ... they accused me of working with [the armed opposition group] RED-Tabara against the government. To tell you the truth, I don’t know anyone in that movement. I think they arrested me because I am not a member of the [ruling] party. I am with the CNL and they know it. They beat me with sticks, electric cables, and kicked me to make me confess to working with RED-Tabara. They did it every morning and evening, the hardest was when they were drunk. They just beat you without caring if they kill you....

After two weeks, he was moved to a different, unidentified location, where he said he could hear people screaming at night. After his release, no investigation has been initiated and the victim lives in hiding, although his case was reported to local authorities.

Many victims interviewed said they continued to live side by side with their tormentors, and feared being targeted again. A 36-year-old CNL party member said he was called by the local administrator (chef de colline) in early January and asked to come to his house. Upon arriving, he also found several Imbonerakure members:

They started asking me questions like ‘where did you find this dead body?’ It was false – I didn’t find a body – they were trying to create problems for me. They also asked why I didn’t want to become a party member. They kept asking questions until midnight and then they took me into the bush. That’s when I understood I was going to die ... they took everything I had on me, my phone, my wallet.... I decided to run away. They followed me so I started screaming for help. I spent the night in hiding.

His family and a senior CNL official raised his case with the prosecutor of Cibitoke and the national human rights commission and both intervened with the local administrator to ensure the victim could return home. However, no investigation was opened against those who threatened him, and he continues to live in fear of retribution. In May, some Imbonerakure members attempted to detain him again.

Many of those interviewed expressed fear of being perceived as government opponents, whether or not they were affiliated with opposition groups. A 43-year-old man who decided to leave the ruling party to join the CNL said he was told by former colleagues in Cibitoke province he would be killed: “There are people who come at night. It’s happened around four or five times. I don’t go walking anymore, I’m home every night by 5 p.m. I can’t ever be alone.” A local CNL representative confirmed that he had also been informed by ruling party officials that the man was a target.

Human Rights Watch received information regarding at least two other arbitrary detentions of opposition party members in Cibitoke province, in November 2021 and March 2022. One former CNL member who recently joined the ruling party was detained on March 30, 2022. Human Rights Watch found that he was arrested by a local intelligence agents and transferred to SNR headquarters in Bujumbura. He is now believed to be held at Mpimba prison in Bujumbura.

Another CNL member from Rugombo commune was taken into custody by police and intelligence agents on November 20, a relative and local CNL representative reported, and accused of providing goods to rebel groups. He was reportedly held at the SNR’s detention cell in Cibitoke then transferred to the SNR headquarters in Bujumbura. He is currently in Mpimba prison, although the circumstances of his detention and treatment remain unclear.

Recommendations

The government of Burundi should:

- Publicly condemn human rights violations by state security forces and ruling party youth members and order such practices ended;
- Conduct credible and transparent investigations into such cases and hold those responsible to account;
- Guarantee the safety, freedom of expression, assembly, and association and physical integrity of political opponents and their relatives, journalists, civil society members, and human rights defenders;
- Ensure that those responsible for armed attacks are arrested and prosecuted in conformity with fundamental rights and due process;
- Stop the Imbonerakure from acting on behalf of security forces and hold to account members involved in human rights violations;
- Fully cooperate with the newly appointed United Nations special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Burundi, and allow access to the country for independent monitoring activities and investigations;
- Take urgent steps to restore the rule of law and end interference by members of the executive branch over judicial authorities.

Armed groups in Burundi should:

- Cease committing human rights abuses and acts of violence against state agents and civilians.

The East African Community (EAC) should:

- Ensure that adherence to human rights principles and respect for the rule of law are front and center of the negotiation process led by the EAC to restore regional peace and security.

EU institutions and member states should:

- Ensure that the roadmap drawn up by the Burundian government in the context of its dialogue with the EU recognizes the severity and scale of human rights violations by state agents, with a focus on the most serious human rights violations such as killings, arbitrary detention, torture and possible enforced disappearances.

Burundi’s international and regional partners, including the EU, African Union, and United Nations institutions, should:

- Establish concrete and measurable benchmarks expected of the government to address these human rights violations to ensure that Burundian authorities bring those responsible to justice;
- Call for structural judicial system and security apparatus reforms with concrete and measurable actions and specific timelines;
- Publicly denounce human rights violations and call for bringing those responsible to justice;
- Publicly call for the immediate and unconditional release of Tony Germain Nkina and all others unjustly detained;
- Urge Burundian authorities to allow the United Nations special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Burundi unfettered access to the country.

ecoi.net summary:

Cibitoke and Kayanza
provinces: Targeting of perceived
political opponents by security
forces accompanied by cases of
enforced disappearances and
impunity for torture and killings

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Burundi

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