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Pattern of Attacks Indicates Perpetrators Enjoy Impunity

(Kampala, June 13, 2016) – The [Uganda](#) Police Force (UPF) should promptly, thoroughly, and transparently investigate a series of attacks on Ugandan non-governmental organizations and human rights defenders and hold suspects accountable, 31 Ugandan and international human rights groups said today in a [letter](#) to the police inspector general. The severity of one of the recent attacks, in which intruders beat a security guard to death, demonstrates the urgency of addressing these attacks, for which no-one has been held responsible.

Between April and May 2016, intruders broke into the offices of at least three groups in Kampala – [the Forum for African Women Educationalists](#) (FAWE), the [Human Rights Awareness and Promotion Forum](#) (HRAPF), and the [Human Rights Network for Journalists-Uganda](#) (HRNJ-Uganda). The break-ins followed more than two dozen previous break-ins at the offices of non-governmental groups since 2012. Although the police inspector general formed a committee of eight officers to investigate the break-ins in July 2014, no one has yet been brought to justice.

"The lack of accountability for attacks on non-governmental organizations has apparently led to an atmosphere in which attackers felt free to kill a security guard, in order to accomplish their aims," said [Maria Burnett](#), senior Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. "The Uganda Police Force needs to live up to its obligation to actively investigate these cases and bring those responsible to justice."

At HRAPF, the assailants beat to death security guard Emmanuel Arituha, ransacked the offices of the director and deputy director, and stole documents and a television screen. They did not, however, take computers, laptops, or other electronic equipment. Colleagues remembered Arituha as "always smiling and very committed to his work." At the time he was killed, he had been helping to pay his two younger siblings' school fees.

The lack of accountability and persistent impunity for attacks on human rights defenders and their offices sends a message that authorities condone and tolerate such attacks

Sarah Jackson, Deputy Regional Director for East Africa, the Horn and the Great Lakes

At FAWE, intruders stole a server, laptop and desktop computers, cameras, and projectors. At HRNJ-Uganda, camera footage shows a visitor apparently providing a dish of food containing sedatives to the security guards, allowing four intruders to search the premises after the guards fell asleep. More than two weeks after the most recent attack, police have not made any arrests.

Organizations whose offices were broken into in 2014 included [Human Rights Network-Uganda](#); [Anti-Corruption Coalition Uganda](#), [Uganda Land Alliance](#), [Action Group for Health, Human Rights and HIV/AIDS](#), and [Lira NGO Forum](#). The groups are all known for their work on sensitive subjects – including corruption, land rights, freedom of expression, and the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) people – and for criticizing government policies.

In a further attack on the premises of [Uganda Land Alliance](#) in July 2015, another security guard, Richard Oketch, was beaten to death. No one has been arrested for his murder.

Each incident has been reported to the police in a timely fashion, but police efforts to investigate and collect evidence such as witness statements, DNA, and CCTV footage have been limited and lacked follow-up. In some cases, the police did not respond to the complaints or, more commonly, provided no substantive update on the status of investigations.

"Human rights defenders already work in a challenging and often repressive environment in Uganda," said Adrian Jjuuko, executive director of [HRAPE](#). "We're determined to continue our work on behalf of the Ugandan people, but we need the police to stop disregarding these threats to our property, our physical security, and even our lives."

As a state party to the [African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), the Ugandan government should ensure the right to life and the right to liberty and security for all persons, as well as the right to freedom of association, both of which are severely impeded when organizations cannot conduct their work in a safe and secure environment. As set out in the [United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders](#), countries have a duty to protect human rights defenders "against any violence, threats, retaliation, de facto or de jure adverse discrimination, pressure, or any other arbitrary action" as a consequence of their work to uphold human rights.

The organizations that sent the letter to the police inspector general called on him to clarify the steps the police have taken to investigate the most recent break-ins, as well as the previous wave of break-ins in 2014. The letter also asked the inspector general to outline how the police will protect human rights defenders, including HRAPE and others whose offices have been attacked, from further acts of violence.

"The lack of accountability and persistent impunity for attacks on human rights defenders and their offices sends a message that authorities condone and tolerate such attacks," said Sarah Jackson, Deputy Regional Director for East Africa, the Horn and the Great Lakes at Amnesty International. "Ending impunity is essential to protecting and ensuring a safe and enabling environment for human rights defenders."

Signatories to the letter include:

Amnesty International, Kenya

Centre for Human Rights – University of Pretoria, South Africa

Chapter Four Uganda, Uganda

COC-Netherlands, Netherlands
 Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, India
 Community Development and Child Welfare Initiatives (CODI) Uganda, Uganda
 EHAHRDP/Defend Defenders, Uganda
 FOKUS – Forum for Women and Development, Norway
 Foundation for Human Rights Initiative, Uganda
 Freedom House, United States
 FRI - The Norwegian Organization for Sexual and Gender Diversity, Norway
 Health GAP, United States
 Human Dignity Trust, United Kingdom
 Human Rights Awareness and Promotion Forum, Uganda
 Human Rights Network for Journalists, Uganda
 Human Rights Network, Uganda
 Human Rights Watch, United States
 Icebreakers, Uganda
 International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA), Switzerland
 Initiative for Social and Economic Rights (ISER), Uganda
 Legal Aid Service Providers Network-Laspnet, Uganda
 NGO Forum, Uganda
 Pan Africa ILGA, South Africa
 Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, United States
 Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG), Uganda
 The African Centre for Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture Victims (ACTV), Uganda
 The National Coalition on HRDs, Uganda
 Uganda Land Alliance, Uganda
 Uganda Network of AIDS Service Organisations (UNASO), Uganda
 UHAI-EASHRI, Kenya
 Unwanted Witness, Uganda

The letter from 31 Ugandan and international human rights groups to the Ugandan Inspector General of Police is available at:

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr59/4248/2016/en/>

For more reporting on threats to human rights defenders in Uganda, please see:

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/08/21/uganda-growing-intimidation-threats-civil-society>

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