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Burundi: Allegations of Killings, Disappearances, Torture

UN Rights Body Should Ensure International Investigations Continue

(Nairobi) – Grave human rights violations have persisted in a context of insecurity in the 15 months since Évariste Ndayishimiye became president of [Burundi](#), Human Rights Watch said. Until Burundian authorities address the root causes of the 2015 crisis and continuing impunity, the United Nations Human Rights Council, meeting in Geneva, should ensure that investigations into the human rights situation in Burundi continue.

New Human Rights Watch research in Cibitoke found that Burundian intelligence services, security forces, and members of the ruling party’s youth league, the Imbonerakure, have allegedly killed, disappeared, and tortured real or perceived political opponents and people suspected of having ties with Burundian rebels in neighboring [Democratic Republic of Congo](#). People crossing the Rusizi river to travel between Congo and Burundi’s Cibitoke province for personal business have been reported missing, and their fate remains unknown.

“Residents of Cibitoke described the banks of the Rusizi river as a graveyard where they saw new bodies appear every week or month,” said [Lewis Mudge](#), Central Africa director at Human Rights Watch. “The combination of rampant corruption, impunity for past abuses, and a crippled judiciary has created the perfect storm for police, national intelligence, and Imbonerakure members to apparently kill, torture, disappear, and steal without consequences.”

The UN Commission of Inquiry on Burundi, established in September 2016 to document grave human rights violations in the country, [concluded](#) on September 16, 2021, that “no structural reform has been undertaken to durably improve the situation. Serious human rights violations have continued to be committed by State officials and members of the Imbonerakure with the acquiescence of authorities or even at their instigation. The rule of law continues to be progressively eroded...”

Between June 2020 and September 2021, Human Rights Watch interviewed 33 Burundian victims, witnesses, former and current security or administrative officials, journalists, and civil society activists about killings, disappearances, torture, and arbitrary detention. Most of the interviews were conducted by phone with sources in Cibitoke province or Bujumbura, the country’s largest city. All spoke on condition of anonymity.

Human Rights Watch also reviewed the reports of [local](#) and [international](#) human rights organizations, media reports, public speeches of government officials, recordings of private meetings between administrative, judicial, and government officials, and social media posts. On September 7, Human Rights Watch wrote to Burundi’s foreign affairs minister, justice minister, with the national human rights commission in copy, to share information and ask questions about the cases Human Rights Watch documented, but the officials have not responded.

Despite some initial, positive steps taken to address the [crackdown on human rights defenders and journalists](#), those who are perceived to be critical of the government have faced continued [repression](#). A [former member of parliament](#) and [a lawyer and former human rights defender](#), both convicted of abusive charges, remain in detention. Although Ndayishimiye has pledged to end impunity and corruption, and made some attempts to rein in the Imbonerakure, reports of killings, enforced disappearances, and torture, often of real or perceived political opponents, [continue](#) across the country.

In one case Human Rights Watch documented and [reported in the media](#), Elie Ngomirakiza, a representative of the National Congress for Freedom (*Congrès national pour la liberté*, CNL), an opposition party, was detained in Ntakangwa commune, in Bujumbura Mairie province, on July 9. Ngomirakiza’s whereabouts have not been revealed, although family members have made multiple requests for information and attempts to locate him. In another case, armed men dressed in military clothes took [Amauri Kwizera – a driver also known as Babu](#) – from outside his house in Bujumbura on July 16, 2021, and drove him away in a white pickup truck with tinted windows and no number plate, according to two sources present at the time. He has not been located since.

Cibitoke province has continued to see high rates of human rights violations, according to [local monitoring groups](#). The security situation worsened after [attacks by armed groups](#) were reported in Cibitoke and other provinces bordering Congo.

Since December 2020, Human Rights Watch has documented four cases of apparent torture at an unofficial national intelligence service (*Service national de renseignement*, SNR) detention facility in Cibitoke town. Former detainees – mainly local farmers – said they were held in small, filthy rooms, were regularly and violently beaten, and questioned about their ties to Congo-based rebels. Some said they heard other detainees being driven off in the middle of the night. One source said he witnessed another detainee’s death.

While the Rusizi river, which forms the border between Burundi and Congo, has [historically](#) been a dumping ground for bodies, this past year saw an increase in bodies being found along its banks, local residents said. Several residents of villages along the Rusizi described hearing pickup trucks driving to the river in the middle of the night and seeing blood on its banks the next morning. A former local administrative official said bodies were brought to the river by intelligence agents and thrown in the river.

In one case Human Rights Watch documented, four sources said that four men in military attire had stopped Emmanuel Baransegeta, 53, from Ruhagarika village, Cibitoke province, as he returned from fishing on the river in the evening on July 8, 2021. A witness saw the men beating him. Two days later, the sources said, a body bearing the same scars as Baransegeta was found nearby along the shores of the Rusizi. They said it was buried without further investigation.

Since August 2020, many sources, including farmers working along the banks of the Rusizi in Buganda commune also described seeing or receiving photos from local residents of dozens of dead bodies found by the river, sometimes with bullet or knife wounds, bruises, or with their hands tied behind their backs with ropes. In many cases, sources who were there when bodies were discovered said local administrative officials, Imbonerakure members, or police officers buried the bodies without investigating. Alleged abusers have been arrested and prosecuted [in only a few cases](#), in trials that often [lacked transparency](#).

Since the land border with Congo was closed in March 2020 due to the [Covid-19 pandemic](#), many cross-border traders or farmers have resorted to crossing the river illegally. Several sources, including a former administrative official, said Imbonerakure members managed these border crossings. Eight sources described cases of people who disappeared after trying to cross the river with money or goods, indicating they believed the Imbonerakure members had killed them. Several cases have also been [reported by local media](#) and [monitoring groups](#).

In one case Human Rights watch documented, a 30-year-old farmer who worked in Congo called a friend to say he would be returning to Burundi via the river crossing manned by Imbonerakure members to see his family and that he would pay them to let him cross, because his identity papers had expired. He was never seen again.

The UN Human Rights Council should ensure that there is continued documentation, monitoring, and public reporting about the situation in Burundi, and hold public debates on the country’s human rights situation, with a focus on justice and accountability. It should urge the Burundian authorities to make concrete commitments to carrying out human rights reforms within a clear timeframe, measured against specific benchmarks.

“The human rights situation in Burundi remains grave, and the absence of an international investigation would only allow the authorities to hide abuse from sight,” Mudge said. “If the Burundian government is serious about reform, it should give external investigators access to the country and work with them to ensure that abusers are held accountable.”

For more details about killings, disappearances, and torture in Cibitoke province, 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 victims’ and witnesses’ fear of retaliation by the authorities. The cases Human Rights Watch documented are only a fraction of those reported by local media and exiled monitoring groups, which continue to regularly publish accounts of abuses across the country.

The ‘Graveyard Province’

Since August 2020, Human Rights Watch has received reports about dozens of bodies washing up on the shores of the Rusizi river in Buganda commune of Cibitoke province. Sources in the area, including farmers living and working next to the river, local journalists and human rights defenders, and current and former local administrative officials, said the dead bodies were most likely either people killed while crossing the river to or from Congo, or people taken at night to the river’s edge in pickup trucks believed by the sources to belong to the intelligence service and executed or thrown into the river.

Alleged Torture at a National Intelligence Service Cell in Cibitoke

Human Rights Watch interviewed four former detainees who were held in an unofficial national intelligence service detention facility located in Cibitoke town, where they said they witnessed abuse and were tortured between September 2020 and August 2021.

Three of the men were farmers, including two who often traveled to Congo to look for work. They all said they had no political affiliations and had no contact with rebel groups in neighboring Congo. The fourth said he was targeted for his political activities. All said they heard detainees being driven away in the middle of the night. One man who was detained at the national intelligence facility in December 2020 said police officers drunkenly gloated about killing detainees and throwing their bodies into the Rusizi river.

One man who was detained there in August 2021 said he was tortured and told to confess to working with RED-Tabara (*Résistance pour un état de droit au Burundi*; Resistance for the Rule of Law in Burundi), a Burundian rebel group operating in Congo. He said he was taken to the house by members of the intelligence service and Imbonerakure in a pickup truck. During his week-long detention, he said men in civilian clothing brutally beat him and interrogated him about rebel group operations in the area:

They hit me everywhere with sticks, as if I were a snake. They beat me in the morning and in the evening, and around me I could hear others screaming. A man in a cell next to me was beaten to death. A man in a police uniform stood outside his cell while men in civilian clothing beat him and told him, “You’re a combatant, even if you deny it, you won’t get away.” I saw him die and they took him out to bury him around 3 a.m.

Former detainees said they were interrogated and beaten by a senior intelligence chief. One former detainee, who was held in December 2020, said:

I was badly beaten. They undressed me and hit me with police clubs. They said that no one would protect me. I was held for four days in a tiny, dirty room. At first, they put me in a room so small I could only stand. A man came on two occasions to beat me. I could hear others being beaten too; they [intelligence and police officials] took people away at night.... They were people from Kirundo, Muyinga, Cibitoke.... We were afraid when we heard a car come at 1 a.m. and drive off at 2 a.m. We suspected they were going to kill people, we heard they put them in bags and drowned them in the Rusizi.

Two other sources said they heard screams from the detention facility when they walked past at night.

One man was arrested in September 2020 and detained there for six weeks. He said police and other men arrested him at his house. He was accused of collaborating with rebels, and said he was taken to a house next to a bank in Cibitoke town:

My first night, I was interrogated by the provincial chief of police (*commissaire provincial*). Then they called three policemen to come hit me. They said I had gone to join the rebels in Congo. The *commissaire* beat me with a metal rod. The policemen hit me 38 times, they punched me and kicked me all over my body. I can’t see from one eye now.

The *commissaire* would come ask me questions. At first, they asked about my background in Congo, then they asked why I wouldn’t join their group [the ruling party]. They said if I didn’t join them, they would kill me. I was interrogated, sometimes up to three times a day. It was often at night, sometimes until 2 a.m., so that I would be tired and accept what they wanted me to confess. Each time they beat me.

He said his family had to pay to have him released, and that his wife had to sell one of his plots of land to pay the bribe.

Dead Bodies in the Rusizi River

In many cases, it is impossible to verify the identities of the dead and cause of death, but several local inhabitants sent photos to Human Rights Watch or described bodies showing signs of torture, knife wounds, or bullet wounds, with their arms tied behind their backs, suggesting they had been executed. In many cases, they said the bodies were buried by Imbonerakure members, police officers, or local administrative officials without further investigations.

In its latest [report](#), the UN Commission of Inquiry on Burundi said: “Corpses have regularly been found in public areas, including near roads and waterways. The local authorities have continued to bury them without seeking to identify the deceased or to investigate the cause of death and possible perpetrators even though most of the bodies present signs of violent death.” It concluded that, although it was impossible to differentiate between violations of the right to life perpetrated by state agents and the Imbonerakure and criminal offenses, the authorities were failing in their obligation to protect the rights to life and to an effective remedy “by refusing to launch credible and impartial investigations into these cases.”

In a [report](#) published in August, Ndondeza, a Burundian exile group documenting enforced disappearances, shared details of seven apparent cases of enforced disappearances of people attempting to cross the Rusizi, five additional cases reported by family members of people who went missing, and two killings that reportedly took place near the river. When authorities deprive someone of their liberty and refuse to acknowledge the detention, or conceal the person’s whereabouts, they are committing an [enforced disappearance](#), a crime under international law and

prohibited under all circumstances. A local journalist told Human Rights Watch: “In Ndava zone of Buganda commune, it’s a slaughterhouse. The Imbonerakure are active in the killings, they bring people to the fields at night. The neighbors hear them.”

A member of the ruling party, the 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), and former local official said: “I saw people brought from other provinces. In Burundi, people are killed for not speaking the same language as the government.... Sometimes police brought people from Muyinga province. They brought them in the night and threw them in the river.”

Sources who live close to the river reported hearing pickup trucks driving to the river at night. Two sources said that they sometimes saw blood on the riverbanks the next day. In one case Human Rights Watch documented, four sources said that four men in military attire had stopped Emmanuel Baransegeta, 53, from Ruhagarika, Cibitoke province, as he returned from working on the river in the evening on July 8, 2021.

“The four military men were asking him: ‘Where did you come from? What do you have?’” one witness said. “He answered that he didn’t have anything, that he’d been fishing. They beat him on the head with the metal butt of their weapons. His voice eventually died down, and when we came out, we saw blood. His body was found nearby in the river.” Two days later, the sources said, a body bearing the same scars as Baransegeta was found nearby along the shores of the Rusizi. They said it was buried without further investigation.

A woman who lives near the Rusizi river in Buganda commune said in November 2020: “In August, I saw two bodies floating down the river. They had been pierced by branches, they were tied up and naked. One branch connected two bodies. We collected them and buried them. Also in August I saw another body floating down, it had a rope tied around its neck.... My father says that he often sees bodies floating down on the Burundian side of the river.”

A man from Ruhagarika, in Buganda commune, said in November 2020 that he saw many bodies floating down the river: “On November 1 or 2, there was a man whose genitals had been cut off. The local authorities just gave the order to bury him immediately... we could see from the marks on his body that he had been beaten.” Other sources from Ruhagarika also reported seeing bodies float down the river regularly.

Statements by Authorities

On July 12, a meeting was held in Rugombo commune with the Cibitoke governor, prosecutor general, army chief, president of the high court, and local commune-level administrative officials to discuss the security situation in the province between April and June 2021. During the meeting, several government officials expressed concern over the dead bodies appearing on the shores of the river. A recording of the meeting shared with Human Rights Watch included the prosecutor of Cibitoke province telling the police to allow investigations on bodies that are found to avoid having “people blame the police or other authorities.”

In the recording, the governor of Cibitoke also said that local administrators should report the bodies to the judiciary to avoid having detractors criticize Burundi. He said the bodies could be people killed in Congo, but that because photos were shared on WhatsApp groups, people assumed they had been killed in Cibitoke province. He said that officials should stop sharing rumors and inform the authorities when bodies were found. Provincial officials reported that bodies had been found along the river, and also said that some of the people had drowned while attempting to swim across the river.

On August 24, 2021, Ndayishimiye [gave a speech](#) to magistrates calling for an end to corruption in the judiciary in order to promote development and investment and to end violent score-settling: “No development is possible in a country without justice. There cannot be peace or development.” Yet, as a judge pointed out to Ndayishimiye during the meeting, another fundamental challenge the judiciary faces remains the influence of the executive and the implication of state actors in serious human rights violations.

Alleged Killings by Imbonerakure Members

Land border crossings between Burundi and Congo were closed in March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and several inhabitants interviewed said that Imbonerakure members often manage illegal border crossings on the river at night. One land border crossing at Gatumba, next to Bujumbura, [reopened in June 2021](#), but many people continue to illegally cross the river between the two countries to avoid paying fees for mandatory Covid-19 tests, to avoid traveling to Gatumba, or because their identity papers are out of date. Sources in the area said that, before the pandemic, people could cross the river by boat at official border posts.

One source said that his brother, a 30-year-old farmer who worked in Congo, had died while crossing the river in July 2021. The source said his brother had called him to say he would be returning via the river crossing manned by Imbonerakure members, who would charge him 200,000 Burundian Francs (approximately US\$100), because his identity papers had expired. He said he would bring back all of his savings, but he was never seen again. The source said: “He had gone to [Congo] for work; he was a farmer and he sent money back home. He wanted to see his family, and since coronavirus he could no longer cross the border.”

Three other sources said Imbonerakure members robbed people attempting to cross the river and drowned them. The member of the CNDD-FDD party and former local official said: “I saw the evildoing of the Imbonerakure who went to Congo. They would help people cross the river, but they drown them and steal their things.” He said he was often informed by family members who had lost a loved one trying to cross the river.

In one case in which Imbonerakure members reportedly killed a young boy after they stole his goats, two of the attackers were [tried and given life sentences](#). However, the authorities have not made sufficient efforts to transparently investigate the killings and ensure justice in the majority of cases, Human Rights Watch said.

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and human rights violations since
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