

Amnesty International

Public Statement

As violence escalates, the EU must do more for Burundi's Human Rights Defenders

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Just over one week ago on 6 November, Welly Nzitonda, the son of Burundi's leading human rights defender Pierre Claver Mbonimpa was found dead after being arrested by police in the country's capital Bujumbura. Amnesty International strongly deplores this attack and stands in solidarity with Pierre Claver Mbonimpa and his family.

This attack comes several months after Pierre Claver Mbonimpa, president of the Association for the Protection of Human Rights and Detained People (APRODH), was shot and injured by gunmen in Bujumbura (on 3 August). He has since travelled to Brussels, Belgium to continue his medical treatment in safety. Pierre Claver Mbonimpa's son-in-law, Pascal Nshimirimana, was shot dead in Bujumbura on 9 October.

These attacks on Pierre Claver Mbonimpa and his family form part of a disturbing escalation of politically motivated violence in Burundi, with daily reports of extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, torture and other ill-treatment in the capital Bujumbura. Most prominent members of civil society have fled the country for their own safety or are in hiding, and independent media houses remain closed.

Hundreds of Burundians have died this year in unrest, which began in April with protests against President Pierre Nkurunziza's plans to seek a third term in office. Residents are reported to be fleeing neighbourhoods of Bujumbura, suspected to be opposition strongholds, as the authorities conduct house-to-house searches. Incendiary rhetoric from top officials is likewise fuelling fears that the already tense situation in Burundi could spiral out of control, leading to mass killings.

The escalation of violence, human rights violations and targeted attacks on human rights defenders such as Pierre Claver Mbonimpa have been a serious test for the European Union's (EU) commitments to act and speak out for individuals at risk in a crisis situation.

In September 2014, the European Parliament issued a resolution on the human rights situation in Burundi and the case of Pierre Claver Mbonimpa, while the European External Action Service (EEAS) likewise cited his case in several statements. EU and international pressure led to his release from detention in September 2014 (he was a prisoner of conscience from May to September 2014). As violence in Burundi escalated in recent months, the European institutions have spoken out on the recent deterioration of the situation in Burundi, and the EU has recently launched consultations with the government under article 96 of the Cotonou Agreement.

Today, Amnesty International calls on the EU to boost its political engagement for human rights defenders, journalists and civil society at risk in Burundi, in line with the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders and commitments in the EU Strategic Framework and the Council Conclusions on the 10th anniversary of the HRD Guidelines.

The EU and its member states must use all bilateral and multilateral opportunities pro-actively to engage with the Burundian government to:

- Urgently engage in the East African Community-led and African Union-endorsed mediation process to end the human rights crisis
- Suspend from their positions members of the security services implicated in human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings, torture of detainees and use of excessive force against prisoners, pending independent, impartial investigations and prosecutions
- Ensure effective protection for all, including measures to allow human rights defenders and journalists to work in a safe environment. Politically motivated attacks must be independently and impartially investigated and those responsible prosecuted
- Re-open independent media houses and lift all restrictions on their broadcasting
- Put in place as soon as possible an independent investigation into the shooting of Pierre Claver Mbonimpa and the killings of his son Welly Nzitonda and son-in-law Pascal Nshimirimana