

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/burundi>

Annual reports

Events of 2016

Burundian President Pierre Nkurunziza takes part in a ceremony in Bujumbura. Nkurunziza's controversial third term won in 2015 roiled the country throughout 2016, with numerous cases of extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and torture committed by security forces.

2016 Evrard Ngendakumana/Reuters

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Global Attacks on Human Rights Values

As Rights Move Online, Human Rights Standards Move with Them

Secondary Education for Children in Emergencies

How New Global Counterterrorism Measures Jeopardize Rights

Strategies to Confront the Shameless

The political and human rights crisis that gripped Burundi the previous year deepened in 2016, as government forces targeted perceived opponents with increased brutality. Security forces and intelligence services often in collaboration with members of the ruling party's youth league, known as *Imbonerakure* were responsible for numerous killings, disappearances, abductions, torture, rape, and arbitrary arrests. Armed opposition groups also carried out attacks and killed ruling party members.

Dozens of dead bodies, some mutilated, were found across the country. The identity of the perpetrators was often unknown.

In December 2015, in the deadliest attack since the crisis began, police and military shot dead a large number of residents in the capital, Bujumbura, following attacks on four military installations, attributed to the opposition.

The justice system is manipulated by ruling party and intelligence officials and judicial procedures are routinely flouted. The prosecutor general created several commissions of inquiry into allegations of serious human rights abuses. Their reports were biased and misleading, largely exonerating security forces and failing to hold those responsible to account.

More than 325,000 Burundians have fled the country since 2015, most to Tanzania, Rwanda, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

On December 11, opposition members, with support from some members of the military, attacked three military positions and a military training center in Bujumbura.

Police, military, and armed *Imbonerakure* pursued the attackers into Nyakabiga and

Musaga, two neighborhoods where residents had demonstrated in large numbers against President Pierre Nkurunziza's third term in 2015. In Nyakabiga, armed opponents engaged the security forces in a sustained gun battle. It is unclear how many were killed on each side.

Police, military and *Imbonerakure* then forced their way into houses and ordered residents to show them where young men or combatants were hiding, some shouting ethnic slurs at Tutsi residents. They killed scores of people in Nyakabiga and Musaga and carried out large-scale arbitrary arrests.

The following day, some victims were found lying side by side, face down; they appeared to have been shot in the back or the head.

On December 12, 2015, police and *Imbonerakure*, accompanied by local government officials and public health workers, picked up some of the dead bodies from Musaga and took them away in local government vehicles to bury them in mass graves in and around Bujumbura.

Several witnesses said that *Imbonerakure*, wearing surgical masks and gloves, dug three or four graves in a cemetery in the Kanyosha neighborhood and buried bodies there.

Then-Prosecutor General Valentin Bagorikunda set up a commission of inquiry into the December 11 events. Summarizing its [main conclusions](#) on March 10, he did not mention killings of Bujumbura residents by the security forces. He claimed that those killed on December 11 were armed combatants wearing police or military uniforms.

There was a sharp increase in torture by the intelligence services and the police, particularly of alleged opposition sympathizers. Intelligence agents beat detainees with hammers and steel construction bars, drove sharpened steel rods into their legs, dripped melting plastic on them, tied cords around men's genitals, and used electric shocks. Many tortured or injured detainees were denied medical attention.

Disappearances and covert abductions increased in late 2015 and early 2016. In December 2015, Marie-Claudette Kwizera, of the human rights group Ligue Iteka, was driven away in a vehicle thought to belong to the intelligence services. She has not been seen again.

In late July, Jean Bigirimana, a journalist with the independent newspaper *Iwacu*, disappeared after leaving his home in Bujumbura for Bugarama, in Muramvya province. Unconfirmed reports indicate he was arrested by the intelligence services. In early August, two decomposed bodies were found in the Mubarazi River in Muramvya, one of which was decapitated and the other weighed down by stones. There was speculation that one of them could have been Bigirimana but local authorities buried the bodies before determining their identities.

Members of the *Imbonerakure* and police, sometimes armed with guns, sticks or knives, raped women whose male family members were perceived government opponents. In some cases, *Imbonerakure* threatened or attacked the male relative before raping the woman. Women often continued to receive threats after being raped.

Imbonerakure and police raped women who attempted to cross into Tanzania, apparently to deter them from leaving Burundi.

Imbonerakure set up roadblocks and check points in some provinces. They extorted money, harassed passersby, and, despite having no powers of arrest, arrested people they suspected of having links to the opposition. They also went door to door, extorting money from residents.

Scores of opposition party members have been arrested, ill-treated, and illegally detained, and other detainees taken to unknown destinations. Police almost never produced warrants at the time of arrest.

Ruling party officials, police, and *Imbonerakure* arrested at least 16 members of the opposition party National Liberation Forces (FNL) at a bar in Kirundo province in March. The police claimed they were conducting a political meeting without authorization. Many more FNL members were arrested in later months.

Large-scale arrests, many of them arbitrary, continued throughout the year. In May, police arrested more than 200 young men and students in Bujumbura's Musaga neighborhood. Local residents said the police ordered them to produce identity cards and household notebooks, an obligatory register of all people living in each house. Police beat some detainees with belts and truncheons.

After a grenade attack in Bujumbura's Bwiza neighborhood in May, the police detained several hundred people. Police spokesperson Pierre Nkurikiye told a local media outlet it was normal to arrest people near the site of a grenade explosion and among those arrested, there may be perpetrators of the attack. Police officials said all those arrested were later released.

Local journalists and human rights activists reported several grenade attacks and killings believed to have been committed by armed opposition groups. Other armed opposition attacks appeared to be more targeted and covert.

Unidentified people attacked several bars in Bujumbura and elsewhere with grenades. Burundian media reported that in May, an attack on a drinks depot and bar in Mwaro province killed a judicial policeman and injured several customers. During the same attack, a guard at the ruling party offices in Ndaya, in Mwaro, was also killed as the attackers attempted to burn down the building. Three men were arrested in connection with the attacks.

In Bururi province, unidentified gunmen shot dead several ruling party members in April and May, including Jean Claude Bikorimana, on April 9. Three ruling party members were among four people shot dead at a bar on April 15; another attack on the same night killed a ruling party member, Japhet Karibwami, at his home.

Most leading civil society activists and many independent journalists remain in exile, after repeated government threats in 2015 and arrest warrants against several of them. In October, the Interior Minister banned or suspended 10 civil society organizations that had spoken out against government abuses.

In February, the Burundian National Communications Council signed an agreement with Radio Isanganiro and Radio Rema FM allowing them to resume their broadcasts. Following an attempted coup d'état in May 2015, the government had closed these stations, along with Radio Publique Africaine, Radio Bonesha, and Radio-Television Renaissance, which remain off the air at the time of writing.

In August, men armed with a machete attacked a Burundian human rights activist in Nakivale refugee camp in Uganda. The activist survived.

There was little progress in regional and international efforts to broker a dialogue between Burundian political actors, co-facilitated by former Tanzanian President Benjamin Mkapa.

The Burundian government reacted with hostility to statements and initiatives by the United Nations, the African Union (AU), the European Union (EU) and other governments and international institutions. Ruling party officials accused donors, foreign journalists and human rights organizations of siding with the opposition. Government officials repeatedly rebuffed diplomats' concerns about human rights.

Most major donors have suspended direct budgetary support to the Burundian government, but some maintained humanitarian assistance. The US and EU have imposed targeted sanctions on several senior Burundian officials and opposition leaders.

The Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) announced in April that it was opening a preliminary examination into the situation in Burundi. In early October, Burundi's parliament voted overwhelmingly to withdraw from the ICC and the government officially notified the UN Secretary-General of its decision to withdraw on October 27.

At a special session in December 2015, the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) tasked a team of three independent experts to investigate human rights violations in Burundi. The team's report, presented in September, found that gross and systematic human rights violations had taken place, some possibly amounting to crimes against humanity. It suggested the HRC review Burundi's membership status. The HRC adopted a resolution presented by the EU calling for a commission of inquiry into human rights violations in Burundi since April 2015, including on whether they may constitute international crimes. The inquiry would also identify alleged perpetrators with a view to ensuring accountability.

In October, the Burundian government, angered by the UN report, stated it had suspended all cooperation with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Burundi and declared the three UN independent experts *persona non grata*.

The UN chose in June not to replace Burundian police in its peacekeeping mission to the Central African Republic because of concerns about human rights abuses in Burundi.

In July, the UN Committee Against Torture held a special session on Burundi and raised serious concerns about torture and other violations. The Burundian delegation failed to show up on the second day to answer the committee's questions, instead sending a statement requesting more time to respond. The committee rejected this request and released its concluding observations in August.

In August, the UN Security Council passed a resolution calling for the deployment of 228 unarmed police officers to Burundi to support UN human rights monitors. Burundian authorities rejected the deployment and pro-government demonstrators protested it.

The AU authorized the deployment of 100 human rights observers and 100 military observers, but only a small number have been deployed because of disagreements between the Burundian government and the AU. The AU authorized in December 2015 the deployment of a 5,000-person African Prevention and Protection Mission in Burundi, which the Burundian government rejected, saying it would consider it an invading and occupying force. The AU did not pursue the proposal.

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