

Human Rights Watch

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

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/07/07/burundi-intelligence-services-torture-suspected-opponents>

Campaign and Advocacy

Help us continue to fight human rights abuses. Please give now to support our work

Dismiss and Prosecute Officials Responsible

[Share this via Facebook](#)

[Share this via Twitter](#)

[Share this via WhatsApp](#)

[Share this via Email](#)

[Other ways to share](#) [Share this via LinkedIn](#)

[Share this via Reddit](#)  [Share this via Telegram](#)  [Share this via Printer](#)

(Nairobi) [Burundian](#) intelligence services have tortured and ill-treated scores of suspected government opponents at their headquarters and in secret locations, Human Rights Watch said today. Police and members of the ruling partys youth league, the *Imbonerakure*, have also committed serious abuses, often in collaboration with the intelligence services.

When I arrived at the *Documentation*, I was told to lie on the ground. They hit me on the rear end with a steel bar. They hit the soles of my feet. They danced on me. They were telling me I had weapons and a grenade that I was going to give to Tutsis.

On July 1, [Etienne Ntakirutimana, head of the SNR] came. He told me to come out of the cell. I showed him where I'd been beaten. He said: You haven't been beaten. You will be seriously beaten now. He made fun of me. He said: If you are a commando, everything that happens to you, you have to accept it. Even if you want to go to Rwanda and play around with [Rwandan President Paul] Kagame, the Hutu people will never be conquered.

The most stressful were the nights at the *Documentation*. They would take people out of the cells and torture them. I heard this. They took them in the courtyard and you'd hear the screaming. They would scream loudly. With time, it got quieter until [presumably] the person died. [Others] were almost handicapped after the beatings.

The SNR transferred the official to Muramvya prison on July 8, and he was formally charged with participating in the failed coup. He was convicted after a flawed trial. In January, the Supreme Court acquitted him and he fled the country. The Supreme Court appeals court later convicted him *in absentia* and sentenced him to life in prison.

On February 18, unidentified men arrested a 22-year-old student in Bujumbura's Ngagara neighborhood and bundled him into a truck. The student believed they were intelligence agents. As they drove off with him, one of the men said to him: Turn over the weapons that you have. They stomped on his chest as he lay in the back of the truck and asked him about the identity and whereabouts of others in his neighborhood. He said:

They brought me to a house in Carama [in Bujumbura]. They had a key to the house and opened it. In the living room, there was a television and wooden chair. They took my clothes off. I was naked. They said: When we hit you enough times, you will end up talking. They beat me with an electrical cable. They beat me on the legs and back with the cable. They said: Speak!

I saw I was going to die. I saw that I was already dead. They went out back; I don't know what they were discussing. That's when I tried to escape. I was going to jump over the fence, but one of them was waiting outside. He caught me. They burned me with a [hot] knife [after] I tried to escape. They brought the knife from outside the house. I could feel the heat on the knife. They cut me just once [on the chest].

The student said his captors continued to beat him and ask questions about the location of hidden weapons and the people who allegedly had guns in the neighborhood:

I told them I knew nobody, and I didn't even participate [in 2015 demonstrations against President Nkurunziza running for a third term]. When I didn't admit anything, that's when they used the sharpened steel bar. They went out back and got it. They pushed it into my leg with more and more force. When they pierced me with it, I lost consciousness.

The student woke up in a police detention center. He didn't know who took him there. He was released the same day.

A taxi driver in his early 30s said that in March someone knocked on his door. When he opened it, an unidentified man was standing in front of him, pointing a gun at his head. Three pickup trucks escorted the taxi driver to a military position in Bujumbura. He said:

They tied my arms behind my back and tied my legs, then they tied my legs to my hands. There was a nail in the wall, and because of the rope [around me] I was hung like a sack on a coat hanger. They beat me and injured my head and arm with a bayonet. They told me to hand over the guns.

The taxi driver estimated that the soldiers suspended him for three hours, then took him down and beat him for several more hours. They told him to reveal the location of hidden weapons. The next day, they took him to the intelligence agency office in Bujumbura.

When I arrived [at the SNR], they [SNR agents] said: That dog [name withheld] has returned. [An SNR agent] took me to a gutter and made me lie down on my stomach and beat me with a thick stick on my feet and rear end. Then another person came and poured liquid on me. I felt like I was burning. I begged them to kill me. They said: You, you criminal, you are going to die slowly.

He said he was beaten twice more. He was in such pain he asked to be killed again. A policeman who worked at the SNR told him: Who would dirty themselves with your blood? The taxi driver said he is no longer able to sit down because of his injuries.

Police arrested a 27-year-old man at his house in Bujumbura in February and took him to the SNR office in Bujumbura. He described his treatment:

When we were [at the SNR], they tortured me with a cable, the kind used to connect to a radio or television. There was no rubber on the cable. They wrapped it [high up] around my leg. They made me sit next to a socket where they plugged the cable in. They plugged it in and disconnected it, shocking me, while asking questions. They said: Show us where the weapons are.

After a while, they changed. They wrapped the cord around my genitals and pulled on them while asking questions. They used the cord for longer, for 20 to 25 minutes.

With assistance from a guard, the man escaped.

Police from the unit responsible for guarding state institutions (Appui pour la protection des institutions, API) arrested a group of people at a bar on the outskirts of Bujumbura in late April 2016 and drove them to the intelligence headquarters in Bujumbura. A 40-year-old man who was arrested said:

We arrived around noon, but the trucks didnt enter directly. We spent an hour outside the *Documentation*. We learned afterward that the white people from ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] were inside and thats why they didnt want to take us there. We had to wait until they had left.

Several detainees who had been held at the SNR headquarters said they were locked in a small toilet room. An official with access to the SNR said that senior intelligence officials, demobilized rebel fighters, and *Imbonerakure* beat detainees and hid them from international monitors. The official said:

They were beaten in the cells or in the courtyard. There are people who are demobs [demobilized fighters], *Imbonerakure*. I dont know where they came from. Sometimes they were at the entrance, other times inside the courtyard. They did the torture. What really struck me was that they put [detainees] in the toilet. They were in the toilet for three days.

Police arrested a man in February in Bujumbura and immediately beat him with truncheons and gun butts. They told him to admit that he collaborated with the opposition leaders Alexis Sinduhije, Hussein Radjabu, and Godefroid Niyombare. They then took him to the SNR headquarters in Bujumbura. He said:

[An SNR agent] took me to a kind of hallway and handcuffed me and started to seriously beat me. There was a chair with iron sticking out of it and big rocks that held up the chair. They tied me to the chair with handcuffs. They beat me with a kind of cable. He said: Its you who killed policemen. Whatever you do, we are going to rule. He took me to a small room, without a window. It was very dark. I couldnt tell if it was day or night. I was still handcuffed. I couldnt leave. I had to go to the bathroom inside the room. The first time they took me out, they gave me at least two hours so I could wash myself well.

On the seventh day, they took off the handcuffs and I went before the judicial policeman. When I was there, [two former opposition members who collaborate with the SNR] came in. They said they knew me. [Name withheld] added that you cant live in Musaga [a neighborhood of Bujumbura] without knowing what happens there. I was questioned seven times by different people who asked me where the weapons were hidden. Some SNR members said I wouldnt leave until I revealed where the weapons were hidden.

The official who had access to the SNR, as well as detainees tortured at its headquarters, said that SNR officials prevented some detainees who bore physical signs of torture from being taken to the prosecutors office. A judicial official said that magistrates from the public prosecutors office questioned tortured detainees at the SNRs premises in Bujumbura instead. The magistrates sent to do this were known to be loyal to the ruling party.

Intelligence officials have also assigned judicial police officers known to be loyal to the ruling party to question detainees suspected of collaborating with the opposition. Some of these judicial officers slapped or beat detainees during questioning. A former government official said a judicial police official at the SNR gave case files directly to a senior intelligence official to review instead of submitting them to the public prosecutors office.

The Burundian Code of Criminal Procedure, article 34, states that detainees can be held for a maximum of seven days, renewable only once, before judges decide whether they should be provisionally released or remain in detention. Detainees should have access to a lawyer while at intelligence agency facilities, but lawyers told Human Rights Watch that the SNR prevented them from entering their headquarters.

In February, men in police uniforms arrested a 34-year-old man on the street in Bujumbura. Passersby who witnessed the arrest started yelling: They are taking [name withheld]! The man said a policeman in the truck pointed his gun at the crowd and the passersby fled. One of the arresting officers stabbed the man in the foot with a bayonet because, the officer said, he did not want the man to reveal that he had stolen his money and phone. The police took him to the intelligence services headquarters. The man said:

At the SNR, they seriously beat me with a steel rod all over my back and legs. When they were beating me, they asked me how many times had I talked to Sinduhije and accused me of being among those who throw grenades in the city.

About 4:30 p.m., they stopped beating me and took me to a cell with other people. During the night, they took me out of that cell and brought me to a very dark place, in a toilet. A person who was in there with me who was called [out of the cell] on Saturday about 9 a.m. When he came back about 4 p.m., his backside was like it was on fire. He had been beaten with a steel rod, and he couldnt sit down. He told us he had been hit 150 times.

I stayed [in the toilet room] for 10 days. On the tenth day, [guards] came and took me out of the dark cell and brought me to a judicial policeman and ordered me to tell him that I had just arrived.

Guards returned the man to the cell with other detainees.

[I was at the SNR] when the magistrate came. He was with [a former member of the armed opposition who acts as an SNR informant]. The magistrate asked him how long we had known one another. [The informant] told the magistrate that Im in contact with Alexis Sinduhije. The magistrate started to question me. He repeated the same accusations [as the SNR]. I asked him: Why didnt I go to court like the others? Why did you come here? He said: You just answer my questions.

Police Torture, Ill-Treatment, and Arbitrary Arrests

Since May 2016, the government has responded to grenade and other attacks it attributes to the opposition with mass arrests and detentions of hundreds of people. Many have been released but many others remain in custody. On May 2, President Nkurunziza said in a public speech: We ask all Burundian citizens to fight those who disrupt security and peace and be finished with them in two months.

After a grenade attack in Bujumburas Bwiza neighborhood on May 28, the police detained several hundred people. The police spokesman, 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.

Bujumburas mayor, Freddy Mbonimpa, said the arrests were necessary to control the movements of the population. To do this, police raided houses and detained people to check household notebooks, a register of all people living in a particular house. It is now compulsory for all households in Bujumbura to maintain a household notebook certified by a local government official.

On May 11 and 13, police arrested more than 200 young men and students in Bujumburas Musaga neighborhood. Local residents said the police ordered them to produce identity cards and household notebooks, but arrested some of them and took them to a nearby administrative office before they had time to collect the notebooks. Police beat some detainees with belts and truncheons and insulted them. Detainees said that the police used *Imbonerakure* and former opposition members to identify suspected government opponents. They recognized some former opposition members who used to live in Musaga circulating among the detainees.

The police mass arrests appeared politically motivated, rather than a genuine attempt to verify household notebooks. A 25-year-old man among those arrested told Human Rights Watch: A policeman said: You have been arrested. You are rebels, and you cant prove that you are not. Look how many of you are here. Do you think you can attack the country with this number of people?

Under Burundian law, police must obtain an arrest warrant to arrest a suspect, unless the person is caught in the act (*en flagrant dlit*). The public security minister, in his letter to Human Rights Watch, said that no suspects were arrested without a warrant except for those who were caught in the act. However, in the majority of cases that Human Rights Watch documented, the police failed to show a warrant to those arrested.

One young man who had been arrested said: The police have nothing on us when they arrest us. They come and catch us like a sack of charcoal. They show us nothing. You know nothing.

Police have tortured and ill-treated detainees. In February, policemen carrying firearms emerged from a police truck and stopped a 27-year-old man on the street. When they ordered him to come with them, he refused. A policeman hit him in the back with his gun butt, then forced him into the truck.

The man said: When the truck was moving, one of the policemen stabbed me with his bayonet in my left leg and said: Thats for hassling us when we were capturing you. I bled a lot.

The police took the man to the police detention center in Bujumbura known as the *Bureau spcial de recherche* (Special Research Office). He said:

In the office of the judicial police officer, they started to stomp on the [leg] wound and hit me with steel bars on my back. They said to go bring them the weapons Im hiding. I told them I didnt have any weapons. The judicial policeman repeated the same thing, and each time I said I didnt have weapons, they hit me with the steel bar.

The next morning, I was brought back to the same office and a policeman slammed my head against the ground and started to hit me again with the steel bar on my buttocks. They wanted to make me confess to having weapons, but I continued to deny it. The next day, they did the same thing.

I spent five days [at the detention center] and was beaten during the first three days, twice a day: in the morning between 8 and 9 a.m. and in the evening about 4 p.m. It was always the same scene: questions from the judicial police officer that alternated with blows from the steel bar from the three policemen. Each time it lasted at least 30 minutes.

They showed me a photo [on a computer] of myself when I was participating in the demonstrations [against President Nkurunziza's third term in 2015]. I was circled in red on the photo. Maybe that was the basis on which they arrested me.

On his fifth day at the detention center, a judicial police officer released him without explanation, telling him: I never want to see you again. The man continues to have pain in his spine where the police beat him.

In April, two policemen stopped a 36-year-old man on the street in a western province and asked for his identity card. He said:

They called someone. I saw a truck coming and someone in it [wearing a police uniform] said: That's him! That's him! In the truck there was the driver, a police commander, and five policemen. They started beating me. We got in the truck and they took me to Bujumbura. They took my phone and looked at the messages. They said: Who are you sending these messages to? You work for human rights. I said I don't work for human rights.

The policemen took the man to a neighborhood police detention center.

They used *indembo* [police truncheons] to beat me on the head. I said: I did nothing! They beat me for at least two hours, on my feet, my head, all over my body. When they were beating me, they told me to tell them who I sent the message to. I spent the night in a cell with detainees. One was accused of being a demonstrator. Others were accused of robbery and other things. There was one with a broken leg. He couldn't walk. One of [the police] said: Take him to the hospital. Others said: Wait for the doctor; he will come here. But the doctor never came.

When the man's family contacted the police to try to find him, the police demanded an exorbitant ransom. The man said that a police officer told the family: If you have [the money], you can see him. If not, you'll never see him again. The man's family could not afford to pay.

The man said the police beat him on the second day in detention for at least an hour. He said the police officer told him: Tell us who you sent the message to and we'll let you go. The man refused so the police officer tortured him with a metal tool.

On the third day, he was released after another policeman intervened.

The public security minister, in his letter to Human Rights Watch, stated that the police never resorted to torture and observed all legal processes. He highlighted the prohibition of torture in Burundi's Constitution and international and regional treaties that Burundi has ratified. He said that the police received human rights training.

The minister wrote that allegations that the police demand money from detainees or their families in exchange for their release were a lie, and that any police involved in extortion would face severe administrative sanctions and penalties. However, he conceded it would be illusory to claim that police never make mistakes and that more than 70 police officers had been prosecuted since 2015, some for abuses committed during the management of the insurrectional movement before and after the 2015 elections and others for common crimes. He did not provide details of these prosecutions.

Abuses by *Imbonerakure*

In recent years, *Imbonerakure* members have been responsible for numerous killings, beatings, threats and other abuses against suspected government opponents, Human Rights Watch said. *Imbonerakure* often operate alongside the police and intelligence services.

The police, in their [brutal suppression](#) of protests against President Nkurunziza's bid for a third term in 2015, used *Imbonerakure* from neighborhoods where protests were taking place to identify and target demonstrators. Bujumbura residents said they often saw known *Imbonerakure* wearing police or military uniforms, carrying weapons, and operating side by side with the police. One man detained by *Imbonerakure* said he watched them put on police raincoats.

Since February 2016, Human Rights Watch has documented several cases of *Imbonerakure* beating, intimidating, and arresting people in various provinces. Victims, witnesses, and human rights activists say that people rarely report *Imbonerakure* abuses to the authorities because they fear retribution and believe that some security force members collaborate with the *Imbonerakure*.

The ruling party and intelligence services have often used *Imbonerakure* to identify suspected government opponents. Despite having no legal powers of arrest, *Imbonerakure* have frequently arrested people, beaten them, and handed them over to intelligence agents who tortured some of them.

Residents from some provinces told Human Rights Watch that *Imbonerakure* often give orders to the police and that low-level police appear powerless to stop *Imbonerakure* abuses. *Imbonerakure* often collaborate with provincial intelligence authorities after they arrest perceived opponents. In one northern province, *Imbonerakure* told a policeman who asked them why they were beating a man: What are you doing here? Get out of here! The policeman left.

Victims reported that they have seen *Imbonerakure* conducting surveillance and sometimes arresting people crossing the border between Burundi and Rwanda. Government authorities have indicated that many Burundians who go to Rwanda have links with the opposition or may be planning to join Burundian opposition members in Rwanda.

In mid-April 2016, four *Imbonerakure* and a policeman arrested a man on the Burundi side of the border. The *Imbonerakure* made him

take off his shirt and shoes, took his telephone, and bound his arms and legs. They carried him to a makeshift *Imbonerakure* base in the forest, where he saw another man the *Imbonerakure* had beaten. The first man said:

They started beating me with cables like those they use to install fiber optic lines. Others used big sticks. When they were beating me, they said they were going to decapitate me that I maintain relations with Rwandans, and that I'm in touch with putschists [those responsible for the failed coup].

A pickup truck belonging to the SNR provincial commissioner arrived at the forest base and four policemen put the man in the back. The policemen beat him as he was driven to the SNR office, where a senior official accused him of collaborating with the armed opposition. After an acquaintance paid a bribe, Burundian authorities released the man.

A student in a northern province said that on April 18, he was in a bar with friends when a group of *Imbonerakure* wielding wooden rods asked for his identity card and money. When he was unable to give them money, they accused him of helping Burundian rebels cross from Rwanda into Burundi. A truck from the local government office arrived and took him to a nearby province. The student said:

We were held in a cellar of a multi-story house. When we arrived, we were tied up tightly with ropes. [Police] started to beat us with truncheons. We spent four days there and were always tied up. They beat us twice a day: once in the morning about 6 a.m. and once at night about 8 p.m. We were especially beaten on the bottom. Then we were sent to [another province]. The police commissioner drove us there. Wherever we went, we were accused of collaborating with armed groups.

[A senior police official] wanted us to admit that [weapons the police had found] were ours. He intimidated us, saying it's better that we admit it because, according to him, a mistake admitted to is half-way forgiven. We told him that we can't admit something we know nothing about. He said: Are you going to tell human rights organizations [about your arrest] once you've been freed?

A few days later, the senior police official drove him to a rural, uninhabited place and released him.

Imbonerakure arrested a 34-year-old taxi driver in a northern province in early 2016. The taxi driver said:

I saw two *Imbonerakure* come toward me with a policeman. They jumped on me, and they grabbed me by my belt, one on either side of me. A third *Imbonerakure* came and hit me, and they took me by force. I said to a policeman who was nearby: Are you going to let them harm me while you are standing there? The policeman said: I can't do anything for you.

Imbonerakure tied the man's arms behind his back and marched him into the forest.

They started to beat me. They all had wooden rods. They lashed me 300 times. An *Imbonerakure* who said he was the commissioner in charge of operations said: It's you who are supplying the rebels. Even Jesus is an *Imbonerakure*. Whether you want him or not, Nkurunziza should remain president. You'll have to wait at least 200 years until there's a Tutsi president.

The man said one of the *Imbonerakure* who beat him appeared to be Rwandan.

When they were beating me, I screamed loudly and one of them said [in Kinyarwanda, the language of Rwanda]: *Reka nze mbereke!* [I will show you]. Then the same person came and stomped on my stomach and put plastic bags and stones in my mouth so I couldn't yell.

The man paid a bribe of 100,000 Burundian francs (approximately US\$60) to an *Imbonerakure* who released him. The man said he was bruised and swollen and urinated blood after the attack.

Abuses by Armed Opposition Groups

Local journalists and human rights activists have reported several grenade attacks and killings believed to have been committed by armed opposition groups. Former members of armed opposition groups told Human Rights Watch that in the past they had used hit-and-run tactics and grenade attacks to kill ruling party members and suspected collaborators.

Unidentified people have attacked several bars in Bujumbura and other provinces with grenades since early 2016. Burundian media reported that on May 24, 10 men attacked a drinks depot and bar in Mwaro province, killing a judicial policeman and injuring several customers. During the same attack, a guard at the ruling party offices in Ndava, a commune 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, a ruling party member fatally shot on April 9. Three ruling party members were among four people shot and killed at a bar in Bururi province on the night of April 15; another attack on the same night killed a ruling party member, Japhet Karibwami, at his home. Several people were reported arrested after these attacks.

A reported ruling party member, Anitha Nizigama, was shot dead June 12 in Musaga, Bujumbura. The exact circumstances and motive for the shooting have not been confirmed.

In all of these cases, Human Rights Watch was unable to confirm the identity of the attackers. Efforts to interview witnesses to attacks or contact family members of ruling party members or *Imbonerakure* who were killed were unsuccessful.

Unlawful Detention and Abuse in Unauthorized Places of Detention in Uganda

Torture and Unlawful Military Detention in Rwanda

[Share this via Facebook](#)

[Share this via Twitter](#)

[Share this via WhatsApp](#)
[Share this via Email](#)

[Other ways to share](#) [Share this via LinkedIn](#)

[Share this via Reddit](#)  [Share this via Telegram](#)  [Share this via Printer](#)

Human Rights Watch defends the rights of people in 90 countries worldwide, spotlighting abuses and bringing perpetrators to justice

Get updates on human rights issues from around the globe. Join our movement today.

Human Rights Watch is a 501(C)(3)nonprofit registered in the US under EIN: 13-2875808