

Uganda must investigate human rights violations

The Uganda Police Force (UPF) should promptly, thoroughly, and transparently investigate a series of attacks on Ugandan non-governmental organisations, the media and human rights defenders, and hold suspects accountable, 31 Ugandan and international human rights groups said in a letter to the police inspector general.



Image by 123RF

In a statement by Human Rights Watch, 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.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) recounts that 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, says HRW.

"The lack of accountability for attacks on non-governmental organisations 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.

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.

Organisations 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 criticising 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.

Investigations

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, claims HRW.

"Human rights defenders already work in a challenging and often repressive environment in Uganda," said Adrian Jjuuko, executive director of HRAPF. "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 organisations cannot conduct their work in a safe and secure environment, says HRW.

And, 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, HRW adds.

"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:

[Human Rights Watch](#)

[Freedom House](#)

[Human Rights Network for Journalists - Uganda](#)

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
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, Uganda
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

**This statement was originally published on [Human Rights Watch](#).*

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