



BEHIND THE GATE

A rise in torture and disappearances

The Burundi Human Rights Initiative

BEHIND THE GATE

A rise in torture and disappearances

November 2021



WHAT IS THE BURUNDI HUMAN RIGHTS INITIATIVE?

The Burundi Human Rights Initiative (BHRI) is an independent project that aims to document the evolving human rights situation in Burundi. It intends to expose the drivers of human rights violations with a view to establishing an accurate record that will help bring justice to Burundians and contribute to restoring respect for human rights.

BHRI's publications also analyse the political and social context in which these violations occur to provide a deeper and more nuanced understanding of human rights trends in Burundi.

BHRI has no political affiliation. Its investigations cover human rights violations by the Burundian government as well as abuses by armed opposition groups.

Carina Tertsakian, Lane Hartill and Thijs Van Laer lead BHRI and are its principal researchers. They have worked on human rights issues in Burundi and the Great Lakes region of Africa for many years. BHRI's reports are the products of their collaboration with a wide range of people inside and outside Burundi.

BHRI welcomes feedback on its publications as well as further information about the human rights situation in Burundi. Please write to contact@burundihri.org or +1 267 896 3399 (WhatsApp). Additional information is available at www.burundihri.org or on Twitter at http://www.twitter.com/@BHRI_IDHB.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Tolerating violence: the president’s vision threatened by hardliners	4
Methodology	6
1. Moïse Arakaza: a portrait of cruelty	7
Machetes and <i>pili-pili</i> : the police commissioner’s hallmarks	7
Profiting from his position	9
Released from prison, then gunned down by police	10
Turning a blind eye to torture and brutality	11
2. “We will cut you in two”: upsurge in torture and incommunicado detention at the SNR	13
3. Enforced disappearances	17
4. Armed attacks and arrests of perceived opponents	21
Attacks in Mwaro and Muramvya trigger waves of arrests	21
Attacks in September	23
Harassment of perceived opponents continues	24

Tolerating violence: the president's vision threatened by hardliners

Since mid-2021, Burundi's approach to human rights has taken a concerning turn for the worse.

Following a series of armed attacks and ambushes between April and September 2021, government officials accused political opponents of collaborating with armed groups and abducted or arrested dozens of them. The government's diplomatic language of peace and security gave way to a more sinister reality: the authorities have allowed police and intelligence officials to track down any suspected opponents they view as a threat and do with them as they please. Those arrested often ended up at the intelligence headquarters in Bujumbura, where some were tortured until the pain was so intense that they said anything to make it stop. Some detainees were eventually released. Others have not been heard from again.

There may be several explanations for the renewed human rights violations, but one thing is certain: the number of arrests, enforced disappearances and cases of torture of suspected government opponents by the National Intelligence Service (*Service national de renseignement*, SNR) and the police has increased in recent months. These aren't isolated cases. Their frequency and the profiles of individuals detained or disappeared suggest a clear pattern, undermining limited human rights improvements since the 2020 elections.

Despite a near monopoly on the political scene in Burundi, the ruling National Council for the Defence of Democracy-Forces for the Defence of Democracy (*Conseil national pour la défense de la démocratie-Forces pour la défense de la démocratie*, CNDD-FDD) seems to be in a permanent state of anxiety over any hint of a threat to its hold on power – a hallmark of the party for years. It has long viewed the main opposition party, the National Congress for Freedom (*Congrès national pour la liberté*, CNL), and its leader, Agathon Rwasa, as untrustworthy and an obstacle to its control over the country. Some ruling party officials believe that a recent CNL fundraising drive to build a national headquarters was a ruse to raise money to finance a “rebellion”. Allegations such as these take root in the minds of government officials who have been steeped for years in a broth of ruling party misinformation and ideological propaganda and lead to ruthless violence against perceived opponents.

Moïse Arakaza is one such official.

Arakaza, police commissioner of Mugamba *commune*, in Bururi province, until 25 August 2021, has a history of violence against suspected opposition members. When he arrived in Mugamba in January 2021, he started arresting and torturing people he claimed supported the armed opposition. He forced some of them to stand on their hands, upside down, rubbed crushed hot peppers in their noses and beat them with the flat side of a machete. He threatened to decapitate some detainees and to put hot pepper inside a woman's genitals. Despite these acts, neither his superiors in the police nor government or justice officials attempted to stop him, even if some privately criticised him.

Why was Arakaza so violent? He may have wanted to flaunt his brutality to show off his loyalty to the CNDD-FDD. Or he may have been carrying out orders from the intelligence service, for whom he has been working unofficially while serving in the police force. He said he was “on a mission” to bring the people of Mugamba, seen as an opposition stronghold, into line. He also benefitted personally. He frequently extorted the equivalent of several hundred dollars from detainees in exchange for their release, flagrantly flouting the government’s anti-corruption efforts.

Arakaza’s actions exemplify the darkest impulses within the ruling party, a physical manifestation of the hardline ideology that came to dominate the CNDD-FDD during former President Pierre Nkurunziza’s rule, particularly from 2015 to 2020. Some hardline CNDD-FDD members believe in a no-holds-barred approach to political opponents and have a long track record of using violence to achieve their goals. The CNDD-FDD has rewarded, protected and even promoted mid-level officials who support a violent approach to politics. When their actions are denounced, they dismiss them, absolving themselves of responsibility, the duty to investigate or hold party members accountable. Their brutality negates the public relations drive of President Évariste Ndayishimiye and other government officials, who pay lip service to human rights, tolerance and accountability.

Arakaza’s systematic brutality has been so extreme, and affected so many residents of Mugamba, that it attracted media attention. But instead of investigating his actions and holding him accountable, government officials chose a less confrontational approach, one often used by the CNDD-FDD: they redeployed him, transferring him to Bujumbura province, another opposition stronghold.

In 2021, President Ndayishimiye has removed or arrested some well-known human rights violators in the SNR and transferred some, including Nkurunziza loyalists, to Burundian embassies abroad. But for lower-level officials like Arakaza, he appears to rely on speeches and “moralising” sessions, hoping they will absorb his message and be persuaded to change, rather than holding them to account through the justice system.

The combination of violent attacks by unidentified groups and the government’s unwillingness to hold state agents accountable has led to a resurgence of serious human rights abuses in 2021. The response to the attacks reveals a longstanding strategy among hardline ruling party members: use the violence as a renewed pretext to arrest, torture, or disappear perceived opponents.

Investigations by the Burundi Human Rights Initiative (BHRI) found that police and SNR agents arbitrarily arrested scores of real or perceived government opponents after a series of armed attacks since April 2021, particularly in Bururi; many other people were arrested in Muramvya, Rumonge, Mwaro, Makamba, Rutana and Gitega provinces. BHRI also attempted to investigate the armed attacks, in which dozens of people were killed, but was unable to determine the identity or the motive of the assailants.

Many of those arrested following the attacks were arbitrarily detained, and some tortured or ill-treated, at provincial SNR offices before being released or transferred to the SNR headquarters in Bujumbura. There, many underwent days or weeks of torture, ill-treatment and incommunicado detention as officials attempted to extract confessions, information about alleged collaborators or the location of weapons caches. Some detainees at the SNR were reported to have disappeared, but eventually turned up in Mpimba prison in Bujumbura or other detention facilities. Others are still missing.

The recent increase in enforced disappearances, torture and arbitrary arrests should raise a red flag for international actors, as they witness the government turning a blind eye to the kinds of human rights violations that characterised the Nkurunziza era. It should serve as a wake-up call: don't take at face value the government's lofty human rights promises while it continues to torture and disappear suspected opponents. The international silence and apparent indifference to the deteriorating human rights situation risk giving the Burundian government the impression that diplomats and international actors are not aware of or concerned about the increase in violations. This inaction is undermining the international efforts that were made to restore respect for human rights during the 2015 crisis in Burundi. International actors should also be more vocal in formally condemning the violent attacks by unidentified assailants, which killed and injured many people.

The cruelty and viciousness of many SNR and police officials is eroding the carefully curated image of the country that Ndayishimiye has attempted to construct. The damage is largely inflicted by members of his own party who refuse to shed the CNDD-FDD's hardline ideology. Will Ndayishimiye be able to navigate the CNDD-FDD's identity crisis? Will the authorities bring to justice Arakaza and other state agents who are tarnishing Ndayishimiye's vision for Burundi? The president's actions in the coming months will determine whether Burundi slides back towards a pariah state or transforms itself into a country that respects the rights of all its citizens.

Methodology

The information in this report is based on interviews with multiple victims, eyewitnesses and other sources close to the events. BHRI has withheld the identity of witnesses and other details, such as dates and locations, for their protection. BHRI submitted its findings and questions in writing to several Burundian government officials before publication, with a view to incorporating their responses. The only official who replied was the acting prosecutor of Bururi, who acknowledged receipt of BHRI's letter and referred BHRI to the spokesperson of the ministry of justice.

1. Moïse Arakaza: a portrait of cruelty

The people of Mugamba *commune*, in Bururi province, have borne the brunt of the renewed government repression in 2021. The government has long viewed most residents of this area as hostile because of their perceived sympathy to the opposition and has targeted them disproportionately in successive crackdowns.¹ The situation took a turn for the worse following the deployment of Moïse Arakaza as police commissioner of Mugamba in January 2021.

Moïse Arakaza, alias Nyeganyega,² a former combatant with the armed group Party for the Liberation of the Hutu People-National Liberation forces (*Parti pour la libération du peuple hutu-Forces nationales de libération*, PALIPEHUTU-FNL) in the early 2000s, was integrated into the national police in 2009 and joined the CNDD-FDD. In more recent years, he has spearheaded the crackdown against suspected opposition members and collaborators of armed groups in certain *communes* of Bururi and Bujumbura provinces, through arbitrary arrests, torture, ill-treatment and extortion. He is believed to have encouraged at least one extrajudicial execution in 2021. He collaborates with and receives payment from the SNR, in addition to his official police functions. Arakaza and other select police officials have been deployed to areas of the country viewed as opposition strongholds, where the SNR uses additional collaborators based locally to respond quickly to perceived threats.³ Arakaza has handed detainees over to the SNR headquarters, where some were tortured.

Machetes and *pili-pili*: the police commissioner's hallmarks

Arakaza's favourite torture techniques include hitting detainees with the flat side of a machete, rubbing *pili-pili* (hot chilli pepper) in their noses and threatening to kill them.

In one case, after a man had been arrested and brought to the police station in Mugamba, Arakaza took a machete and made the detainee lie face down on the ground. When the detainee hesitated, Arakaza said: "Do you want to fight me? I'm going to kill you." He hit the man with the machete eight times on his backside, then ordered him to take off his shoes and hit him on his feet.

The next day, Arakaza called the detainee out of his cell and told another policeman to bring him his machete again. The detainee tried to run back into the cell, but policemen forced him to go back to Arakaza. When the detainee tried to protest, Arakaza took his Kalashnikov gun and fired two

¹ See The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, "Rumonge: Torture and killings in the name of security", https://burundihri.org/english/march_2021.php, March 2021, and "A stranglehold on Burundi's future", https://burundihri.org/english/december_2020.php, December 2020.

² A term in Kinyarwanda (the language of Rwanda) meaning someone who moves. It is not known how Arakaza acquired this nickname.

³ Interview with confidential source, 28 September 2021.

shots just above the detainee's shoulders. When the detainee didn't move, Arakaza shouted: "I told you, he's a rebel."⁴

In a separate case, a former detainee witnessed Arakaza torturing other detainees in the police cell: "I saw him hit them in front of me, with the flat part of a machete. He put *pili-pili* up their noses." He said Arakaza threatened and insulted the detainees, including with ethnic slurs, assuming that they were Tutsis.⁵

In one instance, Arakaza threatened to rub *pili-pili* on a female detainee's genitals if she wouldn't reveal the whereabouts of a man he was looking for. He told another policeman: "Here in Mugamba, there's no difference between a man and a woman. Put her in the cell." He released the woman the next day, but threatened to re-arrest her if he couldn't find the man he wanted to arrest.⁶

Accusations of collaboration with armed groups – a common charge in Burundi – has been Arakaza's usual pretext for arresting and torturing people. In early 2021, for example, Arakaza arrested a man on accusations of collaborating with combatants. He took him to his office and told him to denounce his collaborators and show him where they hid their weapons. When the detainee rejected these accusations, Arakaza told him: "You don't know me. First, I'm going to slap you, then you'll tell me everything." The detainee could see various objects in Arakaza's office, including sticks, a machete, ropes, hot pepper, a hammer and stones. Arakaza picked up a machete and said: "We have to cut your legs. Then we'll see if you continue participating in armed groups." He hit the detainee's legs three times with the flat side of the machete, then hit him on the back and the backside with a stick. The detainee was held at the police detention centre in Mugamba before being transferred to the SNR in Bujumbura, where an official questioned and threatened him: "You, young people from Mugamba, we're going to build a new prison for you."⁷

Arakaza also took the liberty to arrest people who he felt were opposing his actions. In around June 2021, a rumour spread in Mugamba that Arakaza might be deployed to another area; even some CNDD-FDD members had asked for him to be transferred elsewhere (he was eventually redeployed in late August).⁸ A man who expressed joy on hearing this rumour was made to pay the price. Arakaza arrested him, told him publicly he would beat him 400 times, and said he wouldn't release him until all the beatings had been administered. "He asked (the detainee) to count himself the number of beatings each day. He said to him: 'Are you the one who said you were happy that I would be moved elsewhere? I'm not leaving this place because I'm on a mission, you idiot,'" said a source knowledgeable about the situation, adding that Arakaza beat the man about 80 times a day.⁹

⁴ Interview with confidential source, 7 August 2021.

⁵ Interview with former detainee, 13 August 2021.

⁶ Interview with source knowledgeable about the case, 27 July 2021.

⁷ Interviews with confidential sources, 19 and 25 June 2021.

⁸ Interviews with CNDD-FDD members, August 2021.

⁹ Interview with confidential source, 7 August 2021.

On several occasions, when Arakaza failed to find the person he wanted to arrest, he arrested and threatened members of their family instead. In mid-2021, early in the morning, Arakaza went to a man's house and accused a person there of hiding him. "You say he's not at home. If I find that he's here, I'm going to bury you all here inside your house." After searching the house, he arrested the person and said: "For your own security, make sure he (the man he wanted to arrest) arrives. Otherwise, you'll go to that place where a child cries and his mother doesn't hear him."¹⁰

Arakaza has transferred several residents of Mugamba, or people who are originally from there, to the SNR, knowing they were likely to be tortured there. In some cases, he personally handed them over. For example, he arrested a man in early 2021, detained him for three days, then took him to the SNR in Bujumbura. A judicial police officer at the SNR questioned the detainee, accused him of having a weapon and beat him. He insulted him because he was from Mugamba and said: "We'll do what we did to your friend (another detainee who was tortured) and you'll tell us everything."¹¹ Several men from Mugamba were tortured at the SNR, as a former detainee from another province confirmed: "Those they hurt the most were the ones who came from Mugamba... especially those who were accused of having guns."¹²

Profiting from his position

Arakaza's brutal reputation has enabled him to collect substantial amounts of money. Preying on people's fears, he has frequently extorted large sums from detainees in exchange for their release, sometimes up to 1 million Burundian francs (approximately US\$500). "That's his way of operating. If he arrests you, either you pay or you go to prison," said a man who was arrested by Arakaza and paid a large sum because he believed his life was at risk.¹³ Another former detainee, who was tortured by Arakaza and paid for his release, heard Arakaza say: "When will I get a total of 20 million (Burundian francs) that I need from the residents of Mugamba?" He knew several other detainees who had been beaten daily by Arakaza because they refused or were unable to pay him.¹⁴

Money, however, is not a guarantee of freedom. Arakaza has re-arrested several people even after they paid. In one such case, Arakaza, accompanied by a local government official, arrested two men at home. He warned them and members of their family that if they didn't come out of the house quickly, he would burn the house down. When one of the men tried to resist arrest, Arakaza threatened to kill him. He took the two men to the police station and tortured them. He hit them with the flat side of a machete, warning them: "If you don't tell me where the rebels are hiding here in Mugamba, I'll change the side (of the machete) to cut your legs." Both men were released after paying Arakaza a large sum of money.

¹⁰ Interview with confidential source, 27 July 2021.

¹¹ Interview with confidential source, 17 July 2021.

¹² Interview with former detainee, 30 September 2021.

¹³ Interview with former detainee, 13 August 2021.

¹⁴ Interview with former detainee, 7 August 2021.

A few weeks later, Arakaza returned to the house of one of the two men, in the middle of the night, and rearrested him, and later, the other man. Arakaza soon released both men, but police arrested them again two days later. This time, they were taken away in a vehicle believed to belong to the SNR. They later resurfaced in Mpimba prison in Bujumbura.¹⁵

Most of Arakaza's victims appear to have been targeted for political reasons or in relation to their alleged collaboration with armed groups. Some sources believe Arakaza may have been deployed to Mugamba for the purpose of intimidating or punishing perceived opponents in the area. His collaboration with the SNR may explain why he was overheard saying he was "on a mission".¹⁶ However, he has also tortured detainees accused of common crimes.

In mid-2021, Arakaza and another police officer, acting on his orders, tortured a man accused of a non-political offence and tried to force him to confess. When the detainee denied committing the crime, the other police officer hit him in the face and threatened to kill him. Arakaza then hit the detainee himself and made him repeat his denial of the allegations. He ordered another policeman to go to his office and get a stick, a machete and hot pepper "so we can cut off his head". Arakaza then hit the detainee on his back with the flat part of the machete more than 10 times. He forced him to stand upside down against the wall, and while he was in this position, he hit him on his back with his stick, poured hot pepper into his nose and kicked him on his genitals.¹⁷

Released from prison, then gunned down by police

Bernardino Baserukiye, 20 years old, was shot dead by police on 30 June 2021. He had been released from Mpimba prison on 18 January after serving a one-year sentence for illegal possession of a weapon.

Family members said the police had been looking for Baserukiye since his release, claiming he collaborated with the armed opposition. For a while, he managed to escape their attention by staying with a relative in another province. Then, on 3 June 2021, the police came looking for him at his father's house on Kivumu *colline* (hill), in Mugamba.¹⁸ Baserukiye wasn't there. The police demanded that his father tell them where he was, then arrested and detained him in his son's place.

Later the same day, police arrested a second man. Arakaza tortured him, put *pili-pili* up his nose and tried to force him to confess that he had a weapon. When one of his relatives tried to bring him food in detention, Arakaza slapped his relative, accused him of being an accomplice and detained him too. All three men were released over the next two to three weeks, after paying Arakaza sums

¹⁵ Interview with source knowledgeable about the case, 30 July 2021.

¹⁶ Interview with former detainee, 7 August 2021; interview with confidential source, 28 September 2021.

¹⁷ Interview with confidential source, 19 August 2021, and photos of detainee's injuries.

¹⁸ Burundi is divided into 18 provinces, which are divided into *communes*. Each *commune* is divided into zones, which are further divided into *collines* (hills).

of between 200,000 and 300,000 Burundian francs each (approximately between US\$100 and \$150).

A few days later, on 30 June, Baserukiye was shot dead by police. Witnesses who saw his dead body said he had been shot at least three times in the chest. While the exact circumstances of his death have not been confirmed, witnesses reported that Baserukiye had received a phone call from an unknown person asking to meet him and was seen escorted by police a short time before his death.¹⁹

When Arakaza informed local officials of Baserukiye's death, he expressed satisfaction. He said that the police had done a good job by killing a "rebel", that they had spent a long time looking for him and finally, he had been caught and killed. According to a source close to the events, the police who shot Baserukiye had received an order from Arakaza to kill him rather than arrest him. Arakaza had requested a vehicle to go to Kivumu just before the shooting, but is not believed to have been present when Baserukiye was shot.²⁰

Turning a blind eye to torture and brutality

Senior government and police officials are well aware of Arakaza's track record in Mugamba, as well as in his previous postings in the *communes* of Matana and Bururi (both in Bururi province) and Mutambu (Bujumbura province).

On 25 August, after only seven months in Mugamba, Arakaza was transferred again, this time to Kabezi, a *commune* in Bujumbura province known for its strong support for the CNL.²¹ Arakaza has reportedly continued to arrest and ill-treat detainees and other individuals in Kabezi. BHRI is carrying out investigations into these and past allegations against him.

Several Burundian organisations and media have publicly denounced Arakaza's behaviour.²² In February 2016, Arakaza beat a detainee accused of theft so severely that he died; he had beaten him repeatedly in the police detention centre in Bururi. Initial moves by the provincial prosecutor's office to arrest and prosecute Arakaza were blocked by senior officials, and the case was dropped.²³

¹⁹ Interviews with confidential sources, July and August 2021.

²⁰ This account is based on interviews with several confidential sources close to the case, July and August 2021.

²¹ Burundi National Police, "Décision 530.03.347/IGPNB portant nomination de certains officiers de la police nationale", 25 August 2021.

²² See Télé Renaissance, "Le commissaire de police Moïse Arakaza alias Nyeganyega fait régner la terreur à Mugamba (FORSC)", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h44dYvub0L4>, 4 August 2021, and Radio Inzamba, "Bururi : Qui est Moïse Arakaza, commissaire communal de Mugamba, la bête noire de la population de cette commune ?", <https://inzamba.org/bururi-qui-est-moise-arakaza-commissaire-communal-de-mugamba-la-bete-noire-de-la-population-de-cette-commune/>, 30 July 2021.

²³ Information from confidential source, October 2021.

Privately, senior judicial and police officials have admitted that they knew about Arakaza's crimes, but are not known to have taken any punitive measures against him for the many human rights violations he committed in Mugamba.²⁴

Serious human rights violations have continued under Désiré Nibafasha, Arakaza's successor as police commissioner in Mugamba. Nibafasha was previously police commissioner in Kabezi, Bujumbura province, so he and Arakaza replaced each other in these two politically tense locations. Police in Mugamba arrested a number of people in the aftermath of an attack on 11 September, in which four people were injured when a truck was ambushed on Cogo *colline*, in Vyuya zone.

Nibafasha and police under his command tortured and threatened to kill several detainees accused of owning weapons or participating in armed attacks. They then handed some of them over to the SNR in Bujumbura, where some were tortured again. Nibafasha told a detainee that if he refused to admit that he had a weapon, he would kill him. He then beat him several times on his backside with a rod made of electric cables, warning him that if he didn't tell him where the weapon was located, he would beat him to death. He hit another detainee on the back with the same type of rod and told the judicial police officer who was supposed to question him: "We have to do what we did to his friend. Don't waste time questioning him... People from here (Mugamba) only understand after you put them over fire." Nibafasha then beat the detainee on his feet to try to force him to confess.²⁵

Another police officer from Mugamba beat a detainee, telling him he would continue beating him until he died unless he revealed the location of weapons and denounced other people. The police officer said that they (the police in Mugamba) would only leave Mugamba after razing the whole *commune*, illustrating the authorities' hostility to residents of the area.²⁶

²⁴ Conversation with private source, 6 August 2021.

²⁵ Interviews with confidential sources, September and October 2021.

²⁶ Interview with confidential source, October 2021.

2. “We will cut you in two”: upsurge in torture and incommunicado detention at the SNR

The brutal treatment of detainees in Mugamba is an open secret: Arakaza didn't try to conceal it. But at the SNR headquarters in Bujumbura, and at its provincial offices, a more insidious kind of torture is taking place, away from the public gaze.

Torture for the purpose of extracting confessions or information about other suspects has been an entrenched practice at the SNR for many years. Even before Burundi's 2015 crisis, numerous people were detained by the SNR outside any legal framework and tortured. With the eruption of the political crisis in 2015, thousands of suspected government opponents were arrested. Torture and prolonged incommunicado detention by the SNR became almost systematic, reaching a peak between 2015 and 2017. Some detainees survived to tell their stories; an unknown number were taken away and killed secretly. In the following years, torture continued at the SNR, but fewer cases were reported.

During the second half of 2020, after several attacks by armed opposition groups, reports of torture by the SNR increased. Even during periods when the country appeared relatively calm in 2021, the SNR continued targeting real or suspected government opponents, particularly CNL members, as well as residents of areas such as Mugamba and Burambi (Rumonge province).²⁷

More recently, detainees arrested in different parts of the country and accused of collaborating with the armed opposition have been sent to the SNR headquarters in Bujumbura and tortured there. Some have also been tortured by the SNR in unofficial detention centres in Bujumbura or at the provincial level, including at SNR offices or residences in Gitega, Mwaro, Rutana and Makamba.

Several people detained by the SNR have since been transferred to Mpimba or other prisons; others have been released. Some have not reappeared, leading to fears that they may have been killed. Others have spent months incommunicado in SNR or other detention centres.

Nineteen former combatants of the armed opposition group *Résistance pour un État de droit-Tabara* (RED-Tabara), who were arrested in Rwanda in September 2020 and transferred to Burundi in July 2021, have been held incommunicado for more than three months in military and SNR detention facilities, apparently with a view to extracting information from them about RED-Tabara.²⁸ During a public broadcast on 8 October, a journalist asked a question on the whereabouts of these combatants and the status of their cases. The spokesperson of the Supreme Court, Agnès Bangiricenge, said that investigations were ongoing, that the Prosecutor General had set up a

²⁷ See The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, “Ndayishimiye one year on: has he kept his word on human rights?”, https://burundihri.org/english/june_2021.php, June 2021, and “Rumonge: torture and killings in the name of security”, https://burundihri.org/english/march_2021.php, March 2021.

²⁸ Interview with confidential source, 28 September 2021.

commission to question the combatants and that they would soon be brought to justice; she did not disclose where they were detained.²⁹

SNR agents have warned detainees not to talk about what they experienced or witnessed at the SNR, especially to the media and sources outside the country, and have threatened to kill some detainees if they spoke out.³⁰

Many detainees were arrested on the basis of their previous or current links with opposition parties, in particular the CNL. A few had been in contact with members of armed opposition groups such as RED-Tabara. The SNR uses the Telecommunications Regulation and Control Agency (*Agence de Régulation et de Contrôle des Télécommunications*, ARCT) to monitor communications. ARCT technology allows operators to see the date, duration of calls and location of those communicating on all phone networks in Burundi. The ARCT also has the ability to listen in real time to a limited number of calls. According to one source, the SNR monitored the phones of some individuals they suspected of collaborating with armed groups, who were then forcibly disappeared.³¹ Others were picked up simply because they had been in touch with family members or friends in exile, or because of inaccurate information provided by political opponents.

Despite some changes in personnel at the SNR since President Ndayishimiye came to power in 2020, several officials responsible for killings, torture and other grave human rights violations in previous years remain in place and have been cited in the context of cases in 2021. They include Alfred Innocent Museremu, head of internal intelligence since 2020, Alexis Ndayikengurukiye alias Nkoroka, from the operations department, and Joseph Mathias Niyonzima alias Kazungu.³²

Museremu plays a major role in directing local SNR agents to abduct or arrest individuals suspected of collaborating with armed groups.³³ He and Nkoroka were also directly involved in cases in which detainees were questioned, threatened and beaten for allegedly collaborating with armed groups in 2021. Museremu and other SNR agents tried to force some detainees to admit they were in contact with individuals outside Burundi – allegedly members of an armed group based in Rwanda.³⁴

In mid-2021, police and men in civilian clothes believed to be SNR agents arrested a man at his home in the early morning. The man was known to have been sympathetic to the political opposition in the past and had been critical of the government. When one of his relatives asked where they were taking him, they slapped her. The man and another detainee were held for one night at a provincial SNR office, where they were tortured; SNR agents beat them on their feet and

²⁹ Transcript of media broadcast with spokespersons of various state institutions, Karusi, 8 October 2021.

³⁰ Interviews with former detainees, 16 July and 27 August 2021.

³¹ Interview with confidential source, 28 September 2021.

³² For further information on these individuals, see The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, “A stranglehold on Burundi’s future”, https://burundihri.org/english/december_2020.php, December 2020.

³³ Interview with confidential source, 28 September 2021.

³⁴ Interviews with confidential sources, 9 and 13 August 2021.

backsides with plastic or rubber truncheons as they questioned them. They then transferred them to the SNR headquarters in Bujumbura, handcuffed, blindfolded and with cloth stuffed into their mouths. At the SNR headquarters, they were tortured again, even more severely. One of them was left with wounds on his feet and backside. SNR agents forced him to walk with a jerrycan full of water tied to his genitals. They cut chilli peppers and rubbed them on his genitals.³⁵

A provincial SNR chief also arrested a CNL representative and tortured him in a private house serving as his office. As soon as they arrived there, the SNR official told the CNL member: “Now that you’re in front of me, call the rebels you recruited so they can come and release you. You CNL people, what do you want? I’m warning you: you’re going to answer all the questions I’m going to ask you, without hiding anything. If not, you will see (what happens to you).”

When the detainee denied being involved in any crimes, the SNR official threatened to cut off his legs. He took a whip-like rod made of several cables, told the detainee to take off his shoes and sit on the ground, and asked him how many young men he had sent to join RED-Tabara. He then beat the man on his feet, telling him: “I’m going to cut your feet so you won’t be able to move anymore to recruit (other members).” The detainee was then transferred to the SNR headquarters in Bujumbura, and later to prison.³⁶

Another CNL member was arrested by a group of *Imbonerakure* – the youth league of the ruling party – and taken to the same provincial SNR office. In the middle of the night, the provincial head of the SNR and his aides took him and two other detainees to a nearby forest. The detainees thought they were going to be killed. The SNR agents beat them with a metal rod on their feet and threatened to kill them if they wouldn’t reveal information about armed groups with whom the SNR suspected them of collaborating. They then returned the men to the provincial SNR office and later transferred them to the SNR headquarters in Bujumbura, where they were tortured and interrogated again.³⁷

SNR agents arrested another man in early 2021, blindfolded him and took him to a house used by the SNR. There, SNR agents tortured him and threatened to kill him. A judicial police officer who questioned him said: “Do you know where you are? This is a place of truth.” He told him to answer all questions without lying, otherwise, they would cut him in two and “no one will be able to complain.” The judicial police officer forced the detainee to kneel on small stones, and a policeman beat him on his feet with a stick with wires attached, saying they would cut him into pieces if he didn’t tell them where he kept his weapons.

The SNR agents then forced him to undress and made him lie on a plank with spikes that looked like needles and beat him with sticks on his back. One of them said: “Do you want us to return into

³⁵ Interviews with confidential sources, 6 and 9 August 2021.

³⁶ Interview with confidential source, 8 September 2021.

³⁷ Interview with confidential source, 22 September 2021.

exile? We captured the country. Now you're the ones who will flee."³⁸ After a jerrycan filled with sand was brought into the room, a judicial police officer told him to stand up and said: "You know what that jerrycan is for. We'll give you 30 minutes to think and then, I want you to tell us everything." They left him alone and returned after about an hour. The judicial police officer said to another policeman: "He's had time to think. Let's do the final 'system.'" The policeman tied the jerrycan to the detainee's testicles with a rope. The judicial police officer took his pen and paper and said: "So tell us where the weapons are. If you don't tell us, the next stage is to cut off your head."

The following day, SNR agents beat him again to try to force him to denounce alleged members of armed groups, showing him photos of people and asking him if he knew them. He eventually said he knew some of them, to put an end to the torture. Some of the people he identified were later arrested and tortured by the SNR.

When he appeared in court, the detainee retracted his denunciations and told the court they had been extracted under torture. Despite this, the court ordered that the man and his co-accused be kept in detention and is not known to have ordered an investigation into the torture allegations.³⁹

Some detainees were so badly tortured that they weren't even able to appear in court. Two men from Kayanza province accused of recruiting for armed groups were unable to attend their initial court hearing in October 2021 because they were in a prison clinic after being tortured; one of them had spent at least two weeks in the clinic.⁴⁰

As mentioned in Chapter 1, some detainees tortured by the police in Mugamba were sent to the SNR headquarters where they were tortured again. In September 2021, a judicial police officer at the SNR in Bujumbura tortured several men from Mugamba to try to force them to admit they had participated in or had information about armed attacks; one detainee described being beaten "like an animal". When another detainee denied any involvement in attacks, the judicial police officer ordered him to take off his shoes and lie face down on the ground "because we know that if we don't correct you, you won't say anything". He beat the detainee several times on his backside with a rod made of electric cables, then told him to stay on the ground and lift his feet up, and beat him on his feet. Another detainee was also severely beaten in a similar manner; the judicial police officer told him he would continue hitting him until he revealed the identity of armed assailants.⁴¹

³⁸ A reference to the flight of many Hutus during armed conflict and large-scale killings under Tutsi-dominated governments in previous decades. Today's ruling party, the CNDD-FDD, dominated by Hutus, was originally an armed group that fought the majority Tutsi government. The CNDD-FDD has been in power since 2005.

³⁹ The information on these cases is based on interviews with confidential sources, July 2021.

⁴⁰ Interviews with confidential sources, October 2021.

⁴¹ Interviews with confidential sources, October 2021.

3. Enforced disappearances

Alongside an increase in torture, enforced disappearances have been reported with alarming frequency since mid-2021. A range of people of different backgrounds have been abducted by police, military or individuals believed to be SNR agents in different parts of the country. Among them are several CNL members and members of the former Burundian armed forces, known as ex-FAB, as well as individuals not known for their political activities.

In some cases, family and friends eventually located the missing individuals in detention after several days or weeks. But in other cases, such efforts were in vain, and the fate of those who were taken away remains unknown. An *Imbonerakure* involved in the arrest of a person who disappeared told BHRI that some people suspected of working with armed groups were killed after they were forced to divulge information about these groups.⁴² Those close to the missing individuals often found it extremely difficult to obtain a response from the authorities about their fate, even at the local level, particularly if there were no witnesses to the arrest or abduction. Some family members have been too afraid to report cases to the authorities, fearing repercussions.

The fact that many arrests do not follow regular procedures has exacerbated the problem. Increasingly, arrests have taken the form of abductions, with individuals typically being led away and forced into vehicles believed to belong to the SNR; this is particularly the case for individuals suspected of links with armed opposition groups. The blurring between arrests and abductions, and the authorities' complete disregard for due process, makes it even more difficult for friends and relatives of the disappeared to know who to ask for help or how to trace the person's whereabouts. It also poses serious challenges for human rights organisations to investigate these cases.

Enforced disappearances became a feature of the 2015 crisis in Burundi, particularly in 2016 as the government tried to hide killings, following international condemnation of its violent repression. Despite painstaking work by journalists and human rights organisations,⁴³ most of those who disappeared during this period were never found. The authorities failed to investigate these cases, even when there were leads pointing to the involvement of SNR or other state agents. Some judicial police officers in Bujumbura have been forbidden from investigating disappearances by their superiors.⁴⁴ Up until today, the government has adopted a position of denial about disappearances.

In an interview with Radio France Internationale and France 24 on 14 July 2021, President Ndayishimiye stated categorically: "As far as I know, there are no disappearances in Burundi.

⁴² Interview with *Imbonerakure*, 7 September 2021.

⁴³ In particular, the Burundian human rights organisation Forum pour la conscience et le développement (FOCODE) has worked relentlessly to investigate and expose disappearances, through its Ndondeza (Help us Find Them) campaign and has built up an archive of cases since 2016. See <https://ndondeza.org/>.

⁴⁴ Information from confidential source, 20 August 2021.

Otherwise, you would tell me: ‘This person has disappeared’”.⁴⁵ This was followed by a statement, two weeks later, by the prosecutor general, Sylvestre Nyandwi, who claimed that some reports of disappearances were lies and that some of the people who had allegedly disappeared had gone to join armed groups without informing their families. He said the prosecutor’s office had opened files on cases that had been brought to its attention and encouraged victims’ relatives to file official complaints instead of publicising the information through social media.⁴⁶

In response to a journalist’s question about disappearances, during a public broadcast on 8 October 2021, the spokesperson of the ministry of interior, community development and public security, Pierre Nkurikiye, said that people should report cases to the authorities or to the mixed security committees (which are usually dominated by *Imbonerakure*), instead of publicising them on social media. He claimed that whenever a case had been reported to the authorities, either the person had been found or the authorities were looking for them.⁴⁷

More than 20 enforced disappearances have been publicly reported since July 2021; in most cases, there is little evidence that the authorities have actively investigated them. One of the more widely publicised cases was that of Élie Ngomirakiza, the CNL representative in Mutimbuzi *commune*, Bujumbura province. Ngomirakiza was abducted on 9 July 2021 by men in military uniform, on the road leading from Bujumbura town to Gatumba, near the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). He has not been seen since.

Several sources stated that military from the 112th battalion, headed by Lt. Col. Aaron Ndayishimiye, were responsible for his abduction. An SNR official and a former ruling party official in Bujumbura province allegedly asked Ndayishimiye to abduct him. Ndayishimiye and Ngomirakiza knew each other from when they both fought for the National Liberation Forces (*Forces nationales de libération*, FNL).⁴⁸ After Ngomirakiza was demobilised from the FNL, Ndayishimiye would often visit him at his house in Mutimbuzi. It is believed that Ngomirakiza was killed and buried in the Rukoko forest where, according to a source close to Ndayishimiye, other opponents have been buried.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Radio France Internationale, “Évariste Ndayishimiye : il est temps de revoir les sanctions européennes contre le Burundi”, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/podcasts/invit%C3%A9-afrique/20210714-évariste-ndayishimiye-il-est-temps-de-revoir-les-sanctions-europ%C3%A9ennes-contre-le-burundi?ref=tw>, 14 July 2021.

⁴⁶ See Parquet général de la république, “Point de presse sur les actes de violence observés dans le pays depuis un certain temps ainsi que les allégations de personnes disparues”, <https://twitter.com/ikiriho/status/1420416666345906178>, 28 July 2021.

⁴⁷ Transcript of media broadcast with spokespersons of various state institutions, Karusi, 8 October 2021.

⁴⁸ The FNL was the precursor of the CNL. A predominantly Hutu armed group formed in 1980, it turned into a political party in 2009 and changed its name to CNL in 2019.

⁴⁹ Interview with confidential source, 28 September 2021.

The military opened an investigation into human rights violations committed by Ndayishimiye and his alleged role in Ngomirakiza's abduction. A military spokesperson denied that the army was involved in his abduction, but the authorities have not issued an official statement about the case.⁵⁰

The motive behind Ngomirakiza's abduction is unconfirmed, a frequent challenge when documenting disappearances. Some sources believe that his activities in the political opposition had angered some in the CNDD-FDD, others that his abduction may have been linked to disputes with an *Imbonerakure* or a local official, both of whom had verbally threatened Ngomirakiza.⁵¹

In the aftermath of the attacks in Mwaro in April 2021, the police arrested several local CNL representatives in the province, as part of a wider wave of arrests (see Chapter 4).

One of them was Emmanuel Ndayishimiye, an active CNL member, who worked in a barber's shop in Kibumbu, in Kayokwe *commune*, Mwaro province. On 10 July 2021, a policeman entered Ndayishimiye's shop and asked him for his identity card. He verified the card, returned it to him and left. Concerned, Ndayishimiye closed his shop and decided to leave. As he was on his way home, a vehicle with tinted windows and no number plate – similar to those often used by the SNR – suddenly pulled up, driven by a local *Imbonerakure*. Three men got out – two in police uniforms and one in ordinary clothes. They forced Ndayishimiye into the vehicle and drove off. Ndayishimiye has not been seen since.

CNL members asked the provincial governor and the police commissioner of Mwaro for information on where Ndayishimiye had been taken. These officials claimed they were unable to investigate without knowing the identity of those who abducted him or the details of the vehicle. His family was unable to locate him in detention centres in Mwaro and Muramvya. At the time of writing, Ndayishimiye's whereabouts are still unknown.⁵²

Jean-Marie Ndayizeye, a CNDD-FDD member who worked at the ministry of commerce in the political capital Gitega, went missing on 13 August 2021. He was reportedly arrested in Gitega by an SNR agent sent from the headquarters in Bujumbura, on suspicion of being part of a network of armed criminals. Ndayizeye was apparently aware that the SNR was looking for him and had been trying to avoid arrest. At the time of writing, his whereabouts are not known.

According to some sources, Ndayizeye's disappearance may be linked to that of Bonfils Migabo, a retired ex-FAB to whom he was close. Both men are from the same *colline* in Cankuzo province. Migabo was detained by military intelligence in March 2020, and later sent to Mpimba prison.

⁵⁰ Interviews with confidential sources, July and August 2021. See also CNL statement, <https://twitter.com/BurundiCnl/status/1414865870766190610>, 13 July 2021, and Iwacu, "Élie Ngomirakiza reste introuvable", <https://www.iwacu-burundi.org/elic-ngomirakiza-reste-introuvable/>, 19 July 2021.

⁵¹ Interviews with CNL members and other sources, August and September 2021.

⁵² Interviews with confidential sources, August and October 2021. See also Radio Publique Africaine, "Enlèvement jeudi dernier d'un militant du parti CNL à Kayokwe", <https://www.rpa.bi/index.php/actualites/2securite/enlevement-jeudi-dernier-d-un-militant-du-parti-cnl-a-kayokwe>, 19 July 2021.

After his release, he became aware that the SNR was looking for him and went into hiding. He was abducted by individuals believed to be SNR agents in Bujumbura in August 2021. His family looked for him in various police and intelligence detention centres, but was unable to locate him, fuelling fears that he might have been killed.⁵³

⁵³ Information from confidential sources, August and September 2021.

4. Armed attacks and arrests of perceived opponents

Attacks in Mwaro and Muramvya trigger waves of arrests

Between April and June, several deadly attacks rocked the provinces of Mwaro and Muramvya, in the centre of Burundi, claiming a total of at least 31 lives. These attacks created a sense of insecurity among residents of these areas and anxiety among ruling party members, exacerbated by the mystery surrounding the identity of the attackers. At the time of writing, the identity of the perpetrators has still not been established. Most armed attacks in Burundi in the past have taken place in provinces bordering neighbouring countries, in particular the DRC, where some Burundian armed groups are based. This time, the attackers struck at the heart of the country, not far from the home areas of several senior government officials. Prime Niyongabo, chief-of-staff of the National Defence Force, and Gabriel Nizigama, chief advisor for civilian affairs in the president's office, are both from Muramvya province; Nizigama is from Rutegama *commune*, where one of the attacks took place.

The first two attacks took place in Rusaka *commune*, in Mwaro province, in April, targeting the house of a local CNDD-FDD official and a bar and killing nine people. Another attack killed a man in Ndava *commune* on 18 May.⁵⁴ In the aftermath of these attacks, the authorities were quick to arrest more than a dozen people, including members of the CNL and other opposition parties, some of whom were tortured at the SNR headquarters in Bujumbura.⁵⁵

The authorities went to great lengths to try to implicate members of the opposition. After the April attack on the bar in Rusaka, for example, the provincial police commissioner of Mwaro told one of the people who had been arrested to accuse a member of an opposition party of helping the attackers. When the man said he didn't know the opposition member, he was taken to the SNR office in Mwaro, where both he and the opposition member were beaten and deprived of food. They were later transferred to Mpimba prison, together with five others arrested in relation to the attack, two of whom were subsequently released.⁵⁶

After two separate rounds of arrests in Mwaro province, SNR agents took some of the people they had arrested to a forest, blindfolded them, beat them and threatened them at gunpoint or with a knife to their throat.⁵⁷ They told them to admit they were hiding guns and that they had participated in the attacks, and ordered them to join the ruling party.⁵⁸ The detainees were then taken to the SNR office in Mwaro and held there.

⁵⁴ Ministry of interior, community development and public security, <https://twitter.com/MininterInfosBi/status/1394898039366688771?s=20>, 19 May 2021.

⁵⁵ Interviews with persons knowledgeable about the events, 14 July and 22 September 2021. See also The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, "Ndayishimiye one year on: has he kept his word on human rights?", https://burundihri.org/english/june_2021.php, June 2021.

⁵⁶ Interview with person knowledgeable about the events, 14 July 2021.

⁵⁷ Interviews with people knowledgeable about the events, 14 August and 22 September 2021.

⁵⁸ Interview with person knowledgeable about the events, 22 September 2021.

On 9 May, at least eight people were killed in an ambush in Muramvya *commune*, in Muramvya province, on the road to Bujumbura. A group of armed men, some in civilian clothing, blocked the road and shot at passengers in two vehicles, including a bus. The attack lasted for around 15 minutes. While the government claimed it was an armed robbery,⁵⁹ a survivor said that the attackers “apparently had a mission to kill all the men who were in our vehicle”, as she witnessed them targeting male passengers to prevent them from escaping.⁶⁰ Among the victims were Lt. Col. Onesphore Nizigiyimana, reportedly close to senior military officials, and his daughter. The government said it would carry out investigations into the attack, but has not published any details to date.

SNR agents and police quickly rounded up a group of people living near the scene of the attack as well as seven CNL members. The head of the SNR in Muramvya at the time, Vital Baranyanka, threatened to kill one of the CNL members if he wouldn't reveal who organised the ambush, saying he had received information that the attackers were CNL members.⁶¹ However, a judicial official from Muramvya believed that the men were arrested for political reasons, not because they were involved in the attack.⁶²

On the evening of 26 June, another ambush in Muramvya province, three kilometres from the centre of Rutegama *commune*, killed at least 14 people; the two cars that were targeted were set on fire. Survivors recounted how the attackers shot at the passengers indiscriminately. One of the gunmen told the passengers that if they gave them money, they would leave, but shot them immediately when they offered to do so, indicating the attack was not solely financially motivated.

Witnesses said that *Imbonerakure* were first to arrive on the scene after the attackers had left. Police and military from nearby positions did not intervene during the attack or pursue the perpetrators.⁶³ For some, this spurred the belief that the attackers had – at minimum – some support amongst members of the ruling party or the security forces. BHRI was unable to confirm this or obtain any reliable information about the identity of the attackers.

Immediately after the attack, and over the following days, police, accompanied by *Imbonerakure* and other ruling party members, arrested more than two dozen people, including at least nine CNL members, and took them to a private house in Muramvya used by the SNR where police, Baranyanka and other SNR officials questioned them. Another CNL member was arrested and taken to the local police cell after she said, in a meeting with local administrative and security officials, that one or two hours before the attack, she had seen a group of people in Rutegama who weren't from the area, including an *Imbonerakure* she knew. At least six ex-FAB were also briefly detained. An *Imbonerakure* involved in the arrests admitted to a person close to him that lists of

⁵⁹ Ministry of interior, community development and public security, <https://twitter.com/MininterInfosBi/status/1391474958887489539?s=20>, 9 May 2021.

⁶⁰ Interview with a survivor of the attack, 19 June 2021.

⁶¹ Interview with former detainee, 26 June 2021.

⁶² Interview with judicial official, 26 June 2021.

⁶³ Interviews with survivors of the attacks, June 2021.

people to be arrested had been drawn up before the attack. Most of the detainees were released two weeks later, on 9 July, others in the following week.⁶⁴

On 30 June, police and *Imbonerakure* arrested six CNL members in Ndava *commune*, in Mwaro province, and transferred them to the provincial SNR office. The SNR interrogated them about their alleged involvement in the attacks and about weapons they suspected them of hiding. Three of the detainees were tortured by the SNR in Mwaro, then transferred to the SNR headquarters in Bujumbura. At the time of writing, they are in Mpimba prison, awaiting trial.⁶⁵

The speed and manner of the arrests after the attacks in Mwaro and Muramvya illustrate how quickly the CNDD-FDD, police and SNR officials blame their opponents, often arbitrarily, usually arresting them without warrants and disregarding legal requirements and procedures. Patterns of arrest seem to indicate that incorrect intelligence or rumours, rather than objective evidence, are often the basis of arrests, without any form of scrutiny or credible investigations by the authorities. In some cases, rumours circulated by political opponents or a simple text message were sufficient grounds to be detained by the SNR.

The reflex of lashing out at CNL members may be partly rooted in the CNDD-FDD's historical mistrust of the CNL, dating back to the civil war when they were armed rivals. The belief by some CNDD-FDD members that the CNL has retained weapons or has links to armed groups is still perceived as an existential threat. However, this is only one part of the picture. The government has also cracked down hard on Tutsis, including suspected members of RED-Tabara, ex-FAB and others believed to have weapons or connections with unidentified armed groups – reflecting its extreme nervousness at any potential threat to its hold on power.

Attacks in September

In a worrying escalation, further attacks took place in various locations throughout September. According to media reports, mortars landed near Bujumbura airport on 18 September but didn't cause serious damage.⁶⁶ RED-Tabara claimed responsibility and issued a statement on Twitter that said it had clashed with Burundian military in the nearby Rukoko forest the following day.⁶⁷ BHRI was unable to confirm the identity of the assailants or the veracity of these claims.

RED-Tabara also claimed that it had clashed with the army on 24 September in Mugamba.⁶⁸ A military source confirmed that an ambush had taken place in Mugamba on that day and said: "We

⁶⁴ Interviews with sources knowledgeable about the arrests, July 2021.

⁶⁵ Interview with source knowledgeable about the arrests, 22 and 27 September 2021.

⁶⁶ Iwacu, "Bujumbura : Des crépitements d'armes aux alentours de l'aéroport international", <https://www.iwacu-burundi.org/bujumbura-des-crepitements-darmes-aux-alentours-de-laeroport-international/>, 9 September 2021.

⁶⁷ RED-Tabara, communiqué, https://twitter.com/Red_Tabara/status/1439582858985840650/photo/1, 19 September 2021.

⁶⁸ RED-Tabara, communiqué, https://twitter.com/Red_Tabara/status/1441713641745702913/photo/1, 25 September 2021.

have a military position there. How is it possible for criminals to carry out an ambush in front of soldiers? We know that those who carried out the ambushes on 11 and 24 September in Mugamba wore military clothing and were heavily armed.”⁶⁹ On 25 September, ruling party members told *Imbonerakure* in a meeting to step up night patrols, mentioning the presence of members of an armed group in the country and specifically in their *commune*.⁷⁰ *Imbonerakure* had already been involved in arrests after the 11 September attack.⁷¹ These directives reversed earlier orders issued to *Imbonerakure* to stop harassing and arresting opponents and end night patrols, which had resulted in a decrease in human rights abuses in late 2020 and early 2021.⁷²

Grenades thrown by unidentified individuals near bus stations, at a private home and in other locations in or near Bujumbura and Gitega in September killed more than 10 people and injured more than 100. The government described them as terrorist attacks and promised a detailed investigation.⁷³ The Prosecutor General later accused prominent opponents and critics in exile of being behind the attacks and said arrest warrants had been issued for them.⁷⁴

Harassment of perceived opponents continues

Arrests of opponents, not all of them directly linked to these attacks, continued between July and September, especially in areas where the opposition enjoys strong support. CNL members were particularly targeted and harassed, with local authorities claiming that the party’s legitimate activities were a cover for criminal actions, or plainly stating they didn’t want the opposition to be active in their *communes*.

For example, in July and August, police officers and local government officials, supported by *Imbonerakure*, disrupted CNL meetings in Muhuta *commune* (Rumonge province) and Kayogoro *commune* (Makamba province) and arrested 13 local CNL leaders. They accused CNL members of holding illegal meetings to raise funds for an armed rebellion – a recurring accusation. The CNL members explained that they were fundraising for their local and national party offices. They were detained by the police and released a few days later after paying a fine. The head of the CNDD-

⁶⁹ Interview with military source, September 2021.

⁷⁰ Interview with participant in the meeting, September 2021.

⁷¹ Interviews with sources in Mugamba, September 2021.

⁷² See The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, “Ndayishimiye one year on: has he kept his word on human rights?”, https://burundihri.org/english/june_2021.php, June 2021.

⁷³ Ministry of interior, community development and public security, “Communiqué suite aux actes terroristes à Bujumbura”, <https://twitter.com/MininterInfosBi/status/1440262359482658830/photo/2>, 21 September 2021; Assemblée Nationale, “Communiqué de presse relatif aux actes meurtriers survenus en date des 19 et 20 septembre 2021”, <https://twitter.com/nshingamateka/status/1441341833389346821/photo/1>, 24 September 2021; Ministry of interior, community development and public security, <https://twitter.com/MininterInfosBi/status/1397269693124186125?s=20>, 25 May 2021.

⁷⁴ They include Alexis Sinduhije, leader of the banned opposition party Movement for Solidarity and Democracy (*Mouvement pour la solidarité et la démocratie*, MSD), who has links to RED-Tabara, François Nyamoya, secretary general of the MSD, and civil society activist Marguerite Barankitse. See Iwacu, “Alexis Sinduhije, à la tête d’une bande de terroristes responsables des attaques”, <https://www.iwacu-burundi.org/alexis-sinduhije-a-la-tete-dune-bande-de-terroristes-responsables-des-attaques-2/>, 23 September 2021.

FDD in Muhuta *commune* and former administrator, Diomède Ndimurugohe, had put pressure on one of the CNL members to join the CNDD-FDD to avoid a more severe punishment, which the detainee refused to do.⁷⁵

The attacks in Mwaro and Muramvya emboldened hardline CNDD-FDD members and security officials in other provinces and rekindled their animosity towards political opponents. For example, during public meetings in Kayogoro (Makamba province) in July, Zachée Misago, a CNDD-FDD member of parliament and former administrator of Kayogoro, insulted the CNL and told local officials to arrest its members so that only the CNDD-FDD could operate freely.⁷⁶

On 9 August 2021, SNR agents and *Imbonerakure* arrested three CNL members in Kayokwe *commune* and accused them of recruiting and fundraising for armed groups. The CNL members were detained at the SNR office in Mwaro and questioned by the provincial head of the SNR, Eliphaz Niyongabo, about owning weapons, fundraising efforts and about their movements, which he suspected to be in support of armed groups. Two of the men were released five days later, after Niyongabo told them to leave their party, but the third man, Eric Butoyi, was not released with them. On 11 August, Butoyi was taken out of the provincial SNR office in a military pick-up truck. At the time of writing, he was reportedly being held at the SNR headquarters in Bujumbura.⁷⁷

As has been the case for several years, intelligence agents suspect many ex-FAB of involvement in attacks and collaboration with armed groups. Police officials may sometimes target ex-FAB based on rumours or past suspicions rather than evidence.

On 23 August, for example, police arbitrarily arrested Cyrille Hamenyimana, an ex-FAB soldier, in Kibago *commune*, Makamba province. The provincial head of the SNR in Makamba province, Méroé Ntunzwenimana, interrogated him about whether he had fled to Rwanda and was hiding weapons, which he denied.⁷⁸ A local representative of a *colline* in Kibago said *Imbonerakure* had deliberately spread rumours about the presence of rebels in Kibago as a pretext to arrest perceived opponents, including ex-FAB.⁷⁹ In June, police arrested three other ex-FAB in Vugizo *commune*, also in Makamba.

⁷⁵ Interview with source from Kayogoro, 13 August 2021.

⁷⁶ Interview with source from Kayogoro, 13 August 2021.

⁷⁷ Interviews with sources knowledgeable about the arrests, 17 August and 13 October 2021, and information from confidential source, 15 September 2021.

⁷⁸ Interview with a source knowledgeable about the case, 20 August 2021.

⁷⁹ Interview with local leader, 21 August 2021.