



Burundian police attend a training in Bujumbura in 2017. @2017 Private

Rumonge: torture and killings in the name of security

March 2021

Égide Sindayigaya died in the early hours of 25 January 2021 in a police detention centre in Rumonge province, after being tortured by the intelligence service. A few days earlier, intelligence agents had beaten the 64-year-old man with a whip-like instrument, jabbed a needle into him, and forced him to lie on metal bottle caps. The torture was designed to extract information about his brother, Déogratias Niyongabo, alias Côme, whom the police had killed on 16 January, and other suspected armed government opponents.

In the month before Égide's death, four people were killed in Burambi *commune*, in Rumonge province, where Égide lived. Côme and another man, both accused of being armed opponents, were arrested and later shot dead by the police. Two local government leaders were also murdered in circumstances that remain unclear. More than a dozen people in the area have been arrested, many of them arbitrarily, because of their family ties or perceived association with those killed.

The Burundi Human Rights Initiative (BHRI) also documented several cases from other provinces in which intelligence agents tortured detainees suspected of collaborating with the armed opposition, in the second half of 2020 and early 2021.

Eleven days after Égide's death, President Évariste Ndayishimiye [said](#), during a public event celebrating national unity on 5 February: "The government is responsible for ensuring respect for the law, so that nobody tramples on others." Yet, as has often been the case, the government's positive rhetoric diverged from the reality. Rather than arresting suspects and ensuring they are brought to justice according to due process, the police and the intelligence service in Rumonge have been responsible for killings, torture and arbitrary arrests.

The fact that state agents continue to violate the most basic human rights when dealing with suspects serves as a concrete example of how President Ndayishimiye's public pleas are not translated into action or implemented by the security services. Since August 2020, when armed groups clashed with government forces and [killed civilians](#), violence has persisted in Rumonge province, particularly in Burambi – in contrast to other areas affected by the incursions, where the situation has gradually improved.

In his 5 February speech, President Ndayishimiye stressed the importance of justice: "Where there is no justice, everything is dead," he said. "Please... don't let crimes... become a burden for the future. Don't let them become a burden for our children. Let's sanction them now... The justice system must know how to punish. No crime should go unpunished. If you punish the perpetrator of a crime, you are warning others so they know that whoever commits a crime will be punished."

The president's message could not be clearer. He should now set an example by ensuring that those responsible for Égide Sindyigaya's death from torture, and for killings in Burambi, whether by government forces or opposition groups, are brought to justice.

Killing suspected opponents

Égide's ordeal started on 16 January, when a large group of police and military surrounded his house on Gishiha *colline* (hill) in Burambi. They were looking for Côme who had slipped into Égide's house just before they arrived. The police told everyone in the house to go outside: "We'll give you two minutes," they said. "Otherwise, we will burn the house down." When Côme stepped outside, police grabbed him and forced him to lead them to his own house, which was close to his brother's. But before they arrived there, police shot him dead.

The exact circumstances in which Côme was killed are unclear. The ministry of interior, community development and public security said that Côme had shot at the police with a pistol and that police killed him during "[an exchange of fire](#)". None of the sources interviewed by BHRI could confirm that version of events. Credible information received by BHRI indicates that Côme handed over a pistol and a small spear he was carrying before the police tied his hands together, and later shot him dead.

When a police officer on the scene learned that Côme had been killed, he said to the police and military involved in the operation: “Who killed him before he could tell us the truth? Check if he is already dead. But it doesn’t matter. He has been a criminal for a long time. We will try to get information from those we have caught.”

Witnesses said the police commissioner of Burambi, Jean Damascène Shirambere, was present during the operation, in which police from Gitega also participated. Since the 2020 armed group attacks, a unit of the Mobile Rapid Intervention Group (*Groupement mobile d’intervention rapide*, GMIR) usually based in Gitega has been stationed in Burambi.

Côme was a retired member of the former Burundian Armed Forces (FAB). The security services suspected him of being a key figure in the armed opposition against the government since at least 2015 – which other sources confirmed – and had been [looking for him](#) for several years. In a [video](#) published by the ministry of interior, community development and public security, Prime Ndayisenga, the *chef de zone* (local government official) of Maramvya, which includes Gishiha, accused Côme of providing military training to accomplices, which led to clashes with the security forces in Burambi in 2015. He also claimed that Côme had killed residents of Maramvya who he suspected had revealed information about his presence to the authorities. In a phone interview with BHRI on 2 March, Ndayisenga denied levelling such accusations against Côme and questioned the authenticity of the video.

On 16 January, residents living near Égide’s house heard the shots and saw Côme’s dead body when they approached the scene a few hours later. The police commissioner of Rumonge province, Melchior Hakizimana, who was on the scene, told residents: “Whoever killed him made a mistake, but his brother Égide knows a lot about him. He will tell us later.”

Two days later, also in Burambi, police killed another member of the former armed forces who they also suspected was a key member of an armed opposition group. Protais Niyungeko was arrested on Buhinyuza *colline* on 14 January and detained by the National Intelligence Service (*Service national de renseignement*, SNR) – according to some sources, in its headquarters in Bujumbura. The spokesperson of the ministry of interior, community development and public security, Pierre Nkurikiye, [said](#) that Protais had provided information that led to the arrest of Côme. Witnesses who saw Protais soon after his detention at the SNR said he was very weak, his ribs were injured, and he was unable to walk properly.

On 18 January, the police took him to a valley between the zones of Maramvya and Mariza and told him to show them where he had hidden weapons. Residents who had been ordered to help the police in their search operation were startled when they suddenly heard screams, then gunshots. The police first [said](#) Protais had been killed in an “exchange of fire”, similarly to Côme, but later changed their story, [stating](#) that they had shot him after he attempted to flee and that he died on the spot. When residents arrived at the scene, they saw Protais’s dead body with his hands tied behind his back. Provincial police commissioner Hakizimana told the stunned crowd: “People of Maramvya and Mariza, if you don’t change, you will suffer the same fate. The example is here.”

On the basis of the information available, BHRI does not believe that the police had legitimate grounds for shooting dead two people in their custody, both reportedly with their hands tied and under police escort.

Protais was in such a bad physical state after his detention at the SNR that even if he had tried to escape, the police should have been able to prevent him from doing so without killing him. [Burundian law](#) provides that force can only be used if there are no other options, and states that it should be reasonable and proportional. In a letter on 5 March, BHRI asked the minister of interior, community development and public security, Gervais Ndirakobuca, and the Inspector General of police, Melchiade Ruceke, whether they had investigated these events, but received no response.

Torture by police and intelligence agents

After killing Côme, the police arrested his brother, Égide Sindayigaya, and two neighbours, accusing them of hiding Côme from the authorities. As they arrested Égide, they kicked him and beat him on his head and thighs with the butt of a gun. One of the police officers was heard exhorting his colleagues: “Beat him to death! You see how this old man dares to hide a criminal! How will we correct the people of this zone? It turns out it’s an organised group.”

After stealing items from Égide’s house and crops from his fields, the police first took the three men to a local police station. Then they parted ways.

The police handed Égide over to the SNR. Michel Ndikuriyo, the provincial head of the SNR, took him to his office, where he instructed a police officer: “You will heat the knife if he doesn’t tell the truth. I’m going to cut a few pieces of meat (off him) and put them in the fire.” He ordered Égide to take off his clothes and told him to admit he had been hiding his brother and knew Protais, both of which Égide denied. Ndikuriyo beat Égide on his feet, thighs, chest and back with a plastic rod, shouting at him: “I gave you time to think. I’m going to cut you into pieces, one at a time. I regret that your brother was shot dead while we spent years unable to sleep” (referring to their worry about attacks by armed opponents).

The next day, Égide was transferred to another SNR detention centre, believed to be their headquarters in Bujumbura, where he was asked the same questions and continued to deny the accusations against him. He was severely beaten again, all over his body, with a whip-like rod made of several cables. An intelligence agent told him: “We will cut off your head. You say you don’t know Protais? Tell us where your brother hides his guns. Otherwise, we will kill you.” Égide was forced to kneel on upturned metal bottle caps and to lie on a small board studded with nails. His torturers stabbed him with a needle and hurt his genitals.

On 19 January, spokesperson Nkurikiye [presented](#) Égide, together with two neighbours and a primary school teacher who had also been arrested, to a few selected journalists and to residents of Maramvya. In the presence of provincial and local officials, he congratulated the police for its “commendable work” and accused the group, led by Côme and Protais, of killing 26 people and wounding 13 others in Burambi, as well as in Mugamba (Bururi province) and Mugongomanga (Bujumbura province). Photos on social media showed the four men surrounded by police and heavily armed military, next to five guns and several pairs of boots.



MininterInfosBi @MininterInfosBi · 20 Jan

Démentement à Maramvya (Burambi) en @RumongeProvince d'une bande de criminels qui commettait crimes dans Burambi, Mugamba, Bugarama, Mugongomanga, ... : Niyongabo Déo (Côme) et Niyondiko Protais morts lors de l'échange de tirs, 4 complices arrêtés, 5 fusils et bottines saisis.



Photo circulated on social media showing Égide (third from the left), with other detainees.

Égide had wounds all over his body when he was later transferred from the SNR to the provincial police station in Rumonge. Despite his poor physical state and repeated pleas for medical treatment, the police refused to transfer him to hospital until after he had died on 25 January. In a phone interview with BHRI on 23 February, the governor of Rumonge, Consolateur Nitunga, claimed that Égide died in the hospital, from chronic illness. Several sources contradicted this. Witnesses saw Égide's lifeless body at the police station before he was taken to the hospital several hours later.

Égide was buried on 27 January. A local resident said: "We saw that the police wanted to hide the cause of his death. We were traumatised on the day of his burial. His body was covered with torture marks. Even his arms had scars where he had been tied up. His relatives were afraid to participate in (his) funeral."

A [detailed statement](#) published by the ministry of interior, community development and public security on 30 January, entitled "A group of criminals dismantled in Burambi", refers to Égide's arrest, but does not mention his death.

While Égide was detained at the SNR, his two neighbours were transferred to Burambi police station. There, Shirambere, the police commissioner of Burambi, told the two men to lie down, then beat them hard with a stick, aiming for their feet and thighs. He threatened to kill them if they refused to admit they had hidden Côme and provide information about his accomplices. He told them: "I'm going to kill you today. Do you know how many times my superiors have told me I don't do anything? Tell us, how is it that we spend years looking for one person while he's right before your eyes and you don't say anything?" Both men denied knowing where Côme was living.

Provincial police commissioner Hakizimana was reportedly present during the beatings, and said: “We failed. Côme should have died after we interrogated him. But there is still time. Those we arrested know everything.” Governor Nitunga visited the police station after the initial beatings and was heard saying: “So they refuse (to admit) that they saw Côme? Who knew that an old man... could keep a criminal like that in his house? You, people of Maramvya and Mugamba, just wait.” The beatings intensified after the officials’ comments. The provincial police commissioner then took the two detainees to the provincial police station, and a magistrate later questioned them about their links to Côme and Protais.

At least 12 other people accused of supporting armed opposition groups were arrested between December 2020 and January 2021 in Rumonge. Most had family links with Côme, Égide or Protais or had been accused of communicating with them. The wives of all three men have also been detained or questioned, some more recently, others in previous years. Côme’s wife, Marie Immaculée Sakaganumwe, and her 16-year-old son, Alfred Dusengimana, were arrested in April 2020 for failing to denounce Côme, and sentenced to seven and a half years in prison in October 2020 for “lack of solidarity”. Protais’s wife, Eugénie Habonimana, was [reportedly arrested twice](#), in 2016 and 2019, for similar offences. The wives of Égide and of one of his neighbours – together with their son and daughter, respectively – were questioned when their husbands were arrested on 16 January; the police let them go after a few hours. Côme’s son, Manassé Manirakiza, and Égide’s son, Innocent Kezakimana, were arrested and remain in Murembwe prison at the time of writing.

Other killings and arrests

In late December 2020 and early January 2021, unidentified gunmen killed two local government officials in Burambi. On the evening of 29 December, three assailants shot dead local official Antoine Ruceke at his home on Gishiha *colline*. During the 2020 elections, Ruceke, who was believed to be sympathetic to the political opposition, had been elected as a councillor on his *colline*, where he had previously served as a customary leader (*mushingantahe* in Kirundi) and *chef de colline* (local government official).

Residents said Ruceke had had run-ins with *chef de zone* Prime Ndayisenga, although the latter denied this. A staunch member of the ruling party, the *Conseil national pour la défense de la démocratie-Forces pour la défense de la démocratie* (CNDD-FDD), Ndayisenga, together with police and members of the CNDD-FDD youth league, the *Imbonerakure*, had attempted to arrest people they accused of supporting the armed opposition – in particular former members of the FAB. Ruceke had opposed these arrests.

Ndayisenga told BHRI in a phone interview on 2 March that armed men responsible for ambushes in the area killed Ruceke because he had urged the population to “stop causing trouble and focus on development efforts”. He said four people had been arrested in connection with Ruceke’s death and were detained at Murembwe prison, but did not provide further information.

In a meeting in Maramvya on 5 January with Minister Gervais Ndirakobuca, Ndayisenga had blamed the opposition for the violence in his zone. Ndirakobuca urged local leaders to overcome their divisions, and, according to a [statement](#) by his ministry, asked the population to pray for the armed group to be dismantled. The next day, however, when delivering a similar message in neighbouring Mugamba

commune (Bururi province), another perceived opposition stronghold, the minister added: “If you’re going to behave like the people from Maramvya, we’re going to lock you all up in one place.”

Ndirakobuca’s warnings did not end the violence in Burambi. On 9 January, another local leader, Marie Sylvane Gakima, was gunned down at her house on Maramvya *colline*, in the same zone. Gakima was a member of the CNDD-FDD women’s league. Three members of the opposition party *Congrès national pour la liberté* (CNL), including two family members of Gakima, were arrested. Ndayisenga told BHRI on 2 March that they had been released and that the attackers had not been identified. In a public meeting on 24 January, however, he reportedly said that Gakima was killed because she had given information to the authorities about Côme – implying that the opposition was responsible for her death. He threatened residents that there would be further arrests, based on a list of names he claimed he had. The ministry of interior, community development and public security [blamed](#) a “gang of criminals” led by Côme and Protais for the deaths of Ruceke and Gakima.

A history of opposition and repression

During the 2015 political crisis in Burundi, there was opposition in Burambi, as in other parts of the country, to late President Pierre Nkurunziza’s decision to stand for a third term. As the political crisis escalated, clashes between armed opposition groups and the security forces were [reported](#) in Burambi in late 2015. Attacks by armed groups were often followed by a government crackdown, particularly against residents suspected of supporting or harbouring armed opponents.

The police and intelligence service had been looking for suspected members of the armed opposition, such as Côme and Protais, ever since. Unlike other real or suspected government opponents who fled the country, Côme and Protais had stayed in Burundi and managed to dodge arrest until their deaths.

In 2020, two other men suspected of being armed opponents were killed by the security services in neighbouring Bururi province. On 9 March 2020, [Albert Niyondiko](#) was shot dead in an operation by police and intelligence agents in Mugamba *commune*, and on 15 April 2020, members of the security services killed three people, including Pascal Ninganza, known as Kaburimbo, in Matana *commune*.

Some senior ruling party members have encouraged such killings. In September 2019, Révérien Ndikuriyo, then Senate president, had offered 5 million Burundian francs (approximately US\$2,550) to bring Kaburimbo to him “alive or dead”, accusing him of providing military training to opponents. The CNDD-FDD elected Ndikuriyo as its secretary general on 24 January 2021.

Some residents of Burambi and Mugamba, as well as of neighbouring *communes* in Bururi, Rumonge and Bujumbura provinces, are perceived by the government as hostile to its rule. All three provinces were among those where the CNDD-FDD obtained the lowest number of votes during the 2020 elections.

Attacks by armed opposition groups in August and September 2020 have particularly affected Burambi, especially Maramvya zone. Assaultants killed three CNDD-FDD members there on 6 September 2020 and three other men on night patrol on 15 September 2020, including the local leader of the *Imbonerakure*, known as Kamoteri. The ministry of interior, community development and public security blamed the

group allegedly led by Côme for several of these killings, which BHRI documented in a [report](#) in December 2020.

Two family members of the victims of these armed opposition attacks [spoke](#) during the meeting organised by the police on 19 January. One of them, a father of one of the victims, described how insecurity following the attacks forced him to leave his home and deplored the climate of suspicion and tension in Burambi.

Recurrence of torture cases

Following these incursions by armed groups in the second half of 2020, cases of torture became more prevalent. In previous years, the SNR and the police were notorious for torturing suspected political opponents. At the height of Burundi's political crisis in 2015 and 2016, police and intelligence agents [tortured scores](#) of suspected government opponents in barbaric ways, pouring burning liquid over their bodies, beating them with iron bars, pulling teeth out with pliers, and forcing detainees to watch as others were executed with knives.

Since around 2018, fewer torture cases have been reported, but the true scale is difficult to verify. Since 2020, BHRI has been aware of allegations of torture by police and SNR officials, at provincial and national level, but the overall level of torture at the SNR headquarters in Bujumbura, in provincial offices or secret detention sites is not known. Some detainees held by the SNR have reportedly gone missing; some are believed to have been killed, but their bodies have not been found; and others have turned up alive, weeks or months later.

After the armed incursions in 2020, [BHRI documented](#) several cases of torture, including among more than 80 individuals arrested between late August and early October 2020 in several provinces where attacks were reported. These detainees were accused of collaborating with the attackers, and several were detained in provincial SNR offices. In September 2020, police arrested and beat members of an armed group in Mugamba *commune* (Bururi province) and killed at least one of them.

At least six other men accused of collaborating with armed opponents were tortured by the SNR in September 2020 and January 2021. Among them were four members of the CNL; many members of the party have been accused of links with armed groups. Intelligence agents or police, collaborating with *Imbonerakure* and local government officials, arrested the men in three provinces and transferred them to the SNR headquarters in Bujumbura.

Some of them were first detained and tortured in local police cells or provincial SNR offices. Police from the GMIR and SNR agents held some of them at gunpoint or beat them during their arrest or transfer to the SNR. One of the victims said that when he was transferred to Bujumbura, a police officer spat at him and hit him in the face. "It was like a signal to the police to torture me," he said. In the vehicle, the police beat him with a belt, punched him, and insulted him because of his Tutsi ethnicity.

At the SNR headquarters, intelligence agents blindfolded and tied up the detainees, then beat them with sticks to extract information and confessions. One of the victims said: "I was beaten so badly that my body

was covered in blood and my skin was torn off. I had to lie on my front because I had been beaten on my buttocks and couldn't lie on my back... They told me to admit I was part of an armed group. I admitted it, because I was afraid I would die." Other detainees at the SNR headquarters in Bujumbura said they heard detainees scream in pain from the torture.

In September 2020 and January 2021, SNR agents, at their headquarters in Bujumbura, tortured three detainees with a needle, including, in one case, on his genitals, and beat two others with wire cables – similar to the torture methods that were used on Égide. They forced another detainee into a confined space where he was surrounded by sharp metal spikes while they tortured him; if he moved, the spikes would dig into him.

They also threatened to kill the detainees. A policeman at the SNR told one of the CNL members: "If you don't say anything, we will beat you to death." One detainee heard several SNR agents discuss whether they should kill him.

In September, another man, accused of hiding weapons, was detained at the SNR headquarters, where two police officers jammed a stone in his mouth, beat him with a hammer and lashed him with a rod, especially on his feet, a torture technique frequently used by the SNR. One of his torturers told him: "You're lucky. If we had found weapons already... we would have cut off your head. But we can still do it. Bring me that hammer so I can break his head." When he was transferred to prison, the detainee was unable to walk for a week; the prison authorities kept him apart from other prisoners to cover up what had happened to him. Others were held for longer periods at the SNR until their wounds had healed or were no longer visible.

Several detainees said their family members believed they were dead, as they were unable to locate them – in some cases for several weeks – until the authorities transferred them to a regular prison.

Some judicial officials cooperated in covering up the torture. One of the CNL members said that when he was questioned, he showed signs of his torture to an official from the prosecutor's office. The official responded: "Just answer the questions. You don't have anything else to say." Another torture victim said a judicial official threatened to send him back to the SNR if he continued to speak about his ordeal.

BHRI is not aware of any arrests or prosecutions of SNR or police officials for torturing or killing suspected opponents since 2020, despite the government's promises to end impunity. In January 2021, some SNR officials, including individuals known to have committed human rights violations over several years, were arrested on accusations of illicit trade and embezzlement. While there have been some convictions of *Imbonerakure* and police officers for violent crimes, and in a few cases, for human rights violations, this remains a drop in the ocean; the vast majority of perpetrators have not been held to account.

The information in this document is based on interviews by BHRI with multiple eyewitnesses and other sources close to the events. BHRI has withheld the identity of witnesses and other details 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. None of the officials replied.



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