

SOS-TORTURE BURUNDI REPORT N° 313 PUBLISHED ON 11 DECEMBER 2021

This report by SOS-Torture Burundi covers the period from 4 to 11 December 2021 regarding cases of human rights violations in Burundi.

At least forty-two (42) people were murdered during this period in different localities of the country, including 38 prisoners who died in a huge fire that broke out in the central prison of Gitega and during which 69 other prisoners were seriously injured.

The report also deplores the case of one (1) person who has been missing since his abduction on 20 November 2021 in the town of Gitega by SNR (National Intelligence Service) agents.

1. Violations of the right to life

- On the afternoon of Saturday, 4 December 2021, at around 2 p.m., two lifeless bodies of unidentified men were discovered by farmers at the 2nd transversal of the Ruhagarika hill, in Buganda commune of Cibitoke province (northwestern Burundi).

According to witnesses, the two bound bodies were tied to a tree and their bloody faces were so disfigured as to be unrecognisable, suggesting that the perpetrators had first inflicted atrocious acts of torture on the victims before killing them.

The same sources state that on the arrival of the zone chief sent by the Buganda communal administrator, Pamphile Hakizimana, and accompanied by young Imbonerakure, they chased away all the people present at the scene before proceeding to bury the bodies in the same place where they had been discovered. The identity of the victims as well as the circumstances and the perpetrators of the double assassination have not been clarified.

- On the night of Sunday to Monday, 6 December 2021, at around 1 a.m., a young trader known as Jean Marie Nsabimana was murdered by unidentified criminals who attacked him on his way home at the Ruvumu hill, in the capital of the commune and province of Bubanza (northwestern Burundi).

According to local sources, Jean Marie Nsabimana, who is said to be a demobilised former soldier of the ex-FAB (Burundian Armed Forces), was attacked by unknown individuals who hit him on the head with a metal tool and he died immediately. The same sources suspect that the Imbonerakure are behind this assassination, given that only members of the Imbonerakure youth league carry out night patrols on all the hills in the locality.

- On the morning of Tuesday, 7 December 2021, at around 4 a.m., a fire broke out in the central prison of Gitega, which was completely destroyed by flames due to the late intervention of firemen who only arrived at the scene of the tragedy more than two hours after the fire started. The official toll announced by the government through the Vice President of the Republic, Prosper Bazombanza, who travelled to the scene of the tragedy at the head of a government delegation of 4 ministers, states that 38 prisoners perished in the fire, 26 of whom were burnt to death and 12 asphyxiated by the smoke, as well as 69 others seriously injured. The same government has hastily suggested, without thorough investigation, that the cause of the fire was a short circuit due to prisoners' anarchic tinkering and connections. However, some sources inside the Gitega prison have affirmed that the figures put forward by the government are far from reality and some prisoners have mentioned several hundred people who died in the fire.

In addition, one of the prisoners contacted by telephone by RFI (International Radio France) said that some prisoners shouted for help to alert the police holding the keys to the cells but that they refused to open the doors of their quarters, telling them: "These are the orders we have received". According to other detainees, the fire Brigade arrived two hours after the fire started. All of these

elements point to the possibility of arson, which should not be ruled out. In-depth and independent investigations are therefore necessary to shed light on the cause and nature of this disaster as well as on the reliable assessment of the human and material damage caused by the fire in this prison built in 1929, which housed 1,539 prisoners out of a capacity of 400.

Sources from the Gitega Central Prison Management confirm that the victims of the fire were buried on the evening of the fire, at around 7 p.m., at the Kavumu cemetery located in the Mungwa zone, in the commune and province of Gitega, in the absence of the victims' families.

SOS-Torture Burundi expresses its sincere condolences and sympathies to the families of the many victims who died in the fire and wishes a speedy recovery to the injured. It demands a thorough and independent investigation to shed light on the nature, origin, responsibilities and consequences of this fire, which caused a veritable hecatomb at the Gitega central prison.

- On the night of Wednesday, 8 December 2021, at around 7 p.m., Jean Bosco Ntahobari, aged 66, was murdered with a machete by unidentified individuals who attacked him as he was returning to his home on the Rusororo hill of the Kiramira zone, in the Rugombo commune of Cibitoke province (north-west of Burundi).

According to local sources, the man was returning from a bar not far from his home when he was attacked with a machete by criminals who also exploded a grenade after killing him.

Sources in his family believe that Jean Bosco Ntahobari was murdered by people in his neighbourhood who, prior to the attack, had made repeated death threats accusing him of witchcraft.

SOS-Torture is concerned about the increasing number of cases of assassinations of peaceful citizens, particularly in the province of Cibitoke, whose perpetrators remain unpunished even though a serious judicial investigation would not take long to find them, given that they always leave clues before committing the crimes, which should normally be well exploited by the judicial system. It calls on the judiciary to do everything possible to investigate all cases of assassinations linked to witchcraft, without forgetting those of lifeless bodies found abandoned in the wild which are constantly being discovered throughout the country.

2. Cases of abduction or enforced disappearance

- On 20 November 2021, at around 11.30 pm, Médard Nsabamahoro (35 years old) was abducted from his home at 2nd Avenue No 15 in the Nyamugari quarter in the town of Gitega (central Burundi) by a dozen armed men, some of whom were wearing Burundian police uniforms.

According to witnesses, Médard Nsabamahoro was kidnapped by heavily armed men in two unregistered vehicles, a black Jeep Land Cruiser V8 and a grey double-cab pick-up van. The kidnappers ordered him to open the door of his house and when he opened it, they stripped him naked and beat him severely before taking him away, topless, to an unknown destination. Since then, his family has been looking for him in all the official dungeons, but in vain.

The same sources reveal that the head of the Nyamugari quarter, Majaliwa Ndacayisaba, confirms the abduction of Médard Nsabamahoro by SNR agents and speaks of a simple arrest that falls within the framework of an investigation that has been opened against him, but without giving any further details either on the reason for his abduction or on the place of his detention.

SOS-Torture/Burundi was initiated with the aim of informing national and international opinion about serious human rights violations taking place in Burundi through monitoring reports, particularly on torture, arbitrary arrests, forced disappearances, sexual violence and summary executions.

This initiative to inform on the realities of the country followed the carnage of a hundred people killed during the day of 11 and 12 December 2015 by the police and military under the pretext of pursuing rebels who had just attacked military camps located on the outskirts of the capital.

The areas affected are said to be those contesting the third term of President Nkurunziza, namely Musaga, Mutakura, Cibitoke, Nyakabiga and Jabe, the last two being located in the centre of the Bujumbura town hall.