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Democratic Republic of the Congo: Prominent human rights defender assassinated

The Congolese government must immediately start thorough and independent investigations into yesterday's assassination of human rights activist Pascal Kabungulu Kibembi, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Front Line said today.

Pascal Kabungulu was the Secretary-General of *Héritiers de la Justice* (Heirs of Justice), a leading human rights organization in the Democratic Republic of Congo. He was also the Vice-President of the regional umbrella *Ligue des Droits de l'Homme dans la Région des Grands Lacs* (LDGL).

Pascal Kabungulu was assassinated in his home in Bukavu, eastern Congo, in the early hours of July 31. Three armed men in uniform broke into his house, dragged him out of his bedroom and shot him in front of his family. Family members reported that just before his execution the attackers said, "We were looking for you and today is the day of your death." The men stole Mr. Kabungulu's laptop, a television and a tape recorder.

"Pascal Kabungulu was a highly regarded and courageous defender of human rights who gave hope to ordinary people afflicted by war and misery," the three international human rights organizations said in a joint statement. "Killing a human rights defender means spreading fear across whole communities in Congo."

Héritiers de la Justice is a well-known human rights group that has uncovered grave human rights abuses, including war crimes in eastern DRC. Created in 1991, the organization has been an independent critic of the governments of former Presidents Mobutu Sese Seko, Laurent-Désiré Kabila and the current transitional authorities under Joseph Kabila. The organization has also documented grave abuses by armed groups operating in eastern Congo. Pascal Kabungulu joined *Héritiers de la Justice* in the mid-1990s and became its Secretary-General in 1999. He had been planning to leave *Héritiers de la Justice* to take up a position at the LDGL secretariat in Kigali, Rwanda.

The human rights organizations said that threats against human rights defenders in eastern DRC have been on the rise. Since late last year, a growing number of human rights activists across eastern Congo have received death threats after denouncing serious human rights abuses by provincial authorities. Some activists have had to flee the country fearing for their lives. Several members of Mr. Kabungulu's organization, *Héritiers de la Justice*, based in more rural areas, have been assassinated in the past.

“The government must urgently carry out thorough and independent investigations into Pascal Kabungulu’s assassination, and prosecute those responsible,” the organizations said. “The insecurity of South Kivu cannot be a pretext for inaction. Those who defend the rights of others must be allowed to continue their work free of harassment and persecution.”

Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Front Line also called on the Congolese transitional government to develop an effective plan for the protection of human rights defenders, and asked the United Nations Peacekeeping Mission in Congo, MONUC, to provide the government with technical and logistical assistance in this endeavor.

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