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Democratic Republic of the Congo: Human rights activists targeted

The work of human rights activists in the Democratic Republic of Congo is becoming increasingly deadly, Amnesty International warned today as the country celebrates its fiftieth anniversary of Independence.

The high profile celebrations come just days after the 26 June funeral of Floribert Chebeya Bahizire, the country's most prominent human rights activist, whose body was found the day after he was summoned to attend a meeting with Kinshasa police.

"Death threats against human rights defenders and journalists in the DRC are increasing at an alarming rate," said Veronique Aubert. "It is shameful that the voices that need to be heard most are those being stifled."

Floribert Chebeya was the executive director of one of Congo's largest human rights organizations and had been working on a number of sensitive affairs involving the head of Police General John Numbi. His body was found in his car early on 2 June.

The activist had previously told Amnesty International that he felt he had been followed and that he was under surveillance by the security services.

Floribert Chebeya's funeral was held on 26 June, *International day for the Victims of Torture*, at the wish of his family, who believe he died as a consequence of torture.

Lavish Independence Day celebrations in the capital Kinshasa are to be led by President Joseph Kabila and attended by senior figures such as UN secretary-general Ban Ki Moon.

Amnesty International has called on the Congolese government to launch an independent enquiry of commission to investigate Mr Chebeya's death and the whereabouts of his driver who is still missing. These calls have been ignored by the authorities.

The past year has seen an increase in death threats against human rights activists and journalists in the DRC, usually received by telephone and text message.

Two activists were prosecuted in August and September respectively after their organisations published reports critical of the authorities. Numerous others have been arbitrarily arrested and ill-treated in custody.

Next month marks the 5th anniversary of the death Pascal Kabungulu, another prominent human rights activist who was killed on July 2005 by a group of armed men who broke into his house, dragged him out of his bedroom and shot him dead in front of his family.

The trial of the men accused of killing him has been deadlocked for more than five years. These men, who include soldiers and more senior military and political figures, are still free in spite of a public promise by President Joseph Kabila that justice would be done.

"It is nothing short of hypocritical for Congo to throw nationwide celebrations without

acknowledging the appalling state of human rights in the country today,” said Veronique Aubert. “The Congolese people are trapped in a limbo between an unsatisfactory peace and the threat of further approaching crises.

“Until Congo’s government puts the interest of its people first, security and respect for human rights will remain a distant dream.”

About two million people remain internally displaced in Congo due to continued fighting between the military and armed groups. Unlawful killings, torture and rape remain rife in the eastern part of the country.

MONUC, the biggest UN peacekeeping mission in the world with 20,500 personnel, remains the only force in the DRC capable of providing a measure of protection to the civilian population. The government has repeatedly called for its withdrawal. Amnesty International fears that a withdrawal of MONUC will lead to further deterioration of the human rights situation in the country.

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