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Uganda: Parties and election candidates must respect human rights

As Ugandans prepare to go to the polls in presidential and parliamentary elections on 23 February, Amnesty International today called on all political parties and candidates, as well as the government, to publicly commit to respect human rights during the election process and to prevent abuses by party supporters.

"We are concerned at the growing level of violence and rising level of tension between political supporters in the run-up to the elections -- everyone has the right take part in the conduct of public affairs, freely and without fear," said Amnesty International.

The electoral process will be monitored by more than 500 election observers, including representatives from the European Union, the Commonwealth and the African Union. Amnesty International has called on election observers to include a human rights component in their monitoring.

The Ugandan Electoral Commission, established by the constitution to organize and supervise the elections, has reportedly received some 300 reports of election related complaints since December 2005 -- around 50 of them involving reports of violence. According to reports, at least two people have died in recent incidents.

Although the Ugandan government has said that the elections will be held in an environment that respects human rights, Amnesty International has questions about the commitment of the government in light of the criminal prosecution of presidential opposition candidate Dr. Kizza Besigye. The organization is concerned that the charges against him of terrorism, treason and rape, which he faces before both a civil and military court, may be politically motivated.

Amnesty International also expressed concern at reports of undue restrictions imposed on the media -- including on foreign journalists -- hindering the free flow of information and at the reported occupation of the High Court by army troops and other incidents threatening to undermine the independence of the courts.

The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights has declared that *"in order for citizens to participate freely in elections, the authorities are responsible for ensuring that all the rights that are pivotal to such participation can be enjoyed by all without discrimination."*

Amnesty International called on the Ugandan government during the election to:

- respect the right to freedom of expression and opinion, including freedom of the media and the freedom to seek, receive and impart information;
- ensure all candidates have freedom to campaign as well as unrestricted access to the media;

respect the rulings of the courts in election-related matters and protect the independence of the judiciary;
investigate any human rights abuses by the security forces through an independent and impartial body and bring to justice anyone found responsible for such abuses.

Amnesty International also urged the police and the army to respect the rights of citizens to freedom of expression and association, saying that officers should not interfere with lawful and peaceful assemblies other than to secure the safety of participants and others. If there is a need to disperse rallies and demonstrations, any use of force must be necessary and proportionate

Background

On 23 February, Ugandan citizens will choose a president and Parliament for the next five years in an election in which opposition political parties will be allowed to participate for the first time since current President Yoweri Museveni took power twenty years ago. Previously, parties opposing President Museveni's ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) were not allowed to participate in elections except as individuals. A referendum in July 2005 led to the government and the NRM agreeing to multi-party elections.