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Burundi: Investigate those accused of torturing opposition politicians

Burundian authorities must investigate allegations that state security officials tortured 12 opposition politicians during the country's recent elections, Amnesty International said today.

A Step Backwards details how the individuals were slapped, kicked and hit, at times with batons, all over their bodies. Some reported being threatened with death and, in one case, part of a detainee's ear was cut off while being held by Burundi's National Intelligence Service (SNR) at their headquarters in Bujumbura between June 23 and July 5.

"Reports of torture in Burundi have decreased in recent years, and its re-emergence is a very troubling step backwards," said Erwin van der Borgh, Africa Program Director at Amnesty International.

"It is unacceptable if members of the state security services get away with such heinous acts and if the investigation confirms individuals have committed crimes they should be prosecuted"

The 12 were arrested and most were charged with security related offences in connection with a series of pre-election grenade attacks, many of which appeared to target the ruling party.

Those tortured were opposition party members, some in leadership positions, within their parties. During SNR interrogations, suspects were asked about their party structures, colleagues and alleged plans to destabilize national security.

The SNR has denied the allegations of torture. The SNR's Legal Advisor told Amnesty International that any marks on the bodies of those concerned were the result of resisting arrest. The SNR's explanation is inconsistent with the facts documented in *A Step Backwards*.

The Burundian authorities are yet to open a criminal investigation violating their obligations under national and international law. Torture was criminalized in Burundi's 2009 Penal Code.

"President Pierre Nkurunziza's inauguration on 26 August offers an opportunity for the Burundian government to commit to ending impunity" said Erwin van der Borgh. "The President must publically condemn torture and declare that any official, including SNR agents committing, ordering or consenting to torture will be prosecuted regardless of their rank."

Amnesty International calls on the Burundian government to ensure future compliance of the SNR and other officials with international human rights law and Burundian law.

Notes to editors:

- President Pierre Nkurunziza won re-election in the June 28 Presidential poll. All other candidates boycotted the presidential election alleging mass fraud. International and national election observers noted “irregularities”, but found the elections to be broadly free and fair. Some election observers also noted pre-electoral intimidation.
- President Nkurunziza will be inaugurated in Bujumbura on 26 August.
- Burundi acceded to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment in 1993. Burundi is also a signatory to the 1981 African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights which prohibits torture.
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