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Kenya: Inquiry into assassination of Rwandese opposition leader in exile urgently needed

The Kenyan authorities should spare no effort in launching a prompt and impartial investigation and bring to justice those responsible for the assassination of Rwandese former government minister Seth Sendashonga, who was shot dead in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi, last weekend, Amnesty International urged today.

“We are shocked and saddened by the news of his death and strongly condemn what appears to be a blatant political assassination,” the organization said. “Seth Sendashonga had never been afraid of speaking out against grave human rights violations taking place in Rwanda -- now it seems he has paid with his life.”

“We believe Seth Sendashonga’s assassination is likely to be directly connected to his frequent criticisms and denunciations of human rights violations by the current government and security forces in Rwanda -- and to his profile as one of the few, credible peaceful political opposition figures to have emerged since 1995,” Amnesty International said.

Seth Sendashonga had survived an earlier assassination attempt in February 1996, when he and his nephew were both injured after being shot in Nairobi by people he identified as Rwandese. A diplomat from the Rwandese embassy in Nairobi was suspected by the Kenyan authorities of involvement in the attack; he was initially detained, but released without trial, under pressure from the Rwandese Government. Since that attack, Seth Sendashonga had reportedly been taking precautions for his safety and usually travelled with a bodyguard. However, on the day of his assassination on 16 May, he was reportedly alone in his car with his driver, who was also killed.

“It is imperative for the Kenyan authorities to launch an immediate inquiry into this brutal assassination -- and for the Rwandese authorities to provide their full and unconditional cooperation,” Amnesty International said.

The inquiry -- which should include evidence gathered in connection with the February 1996 assassination attempt -- should be completely independent and impartial and its findings made public. Those found responsible - whether they are in Kenya, in Rwanda or in another country - should be promptly brought to justice.

Amnesty International also appealed to foreign governments to urge both Kenya and Rwanda to ensure that such an inquiry takes place and leads to appropriate judicial action.

Efforts should also be made by the Kenyan authorities to protect other Rwandese living in Kenya. There have been several other cases of Rwandese nationals killed in Kenya over the last few years, which are not known to have been the object of conclusive investigations and which have sown fear among the Rwandese exiled community -- a fear likely to be heightened by the latest assassination.

Background information

Seth Sendashonga, married with three children, had been a member of the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF), which overthrew the former Government of Rwanda in July 1994. As many as one million people had been killed in Rwanda between April and July 1994 in a genocide and other massacres orchestrated by extremist elements within the former Rwandese armed forces and militia. The RPF went on to form the current Government of Rwanda in the aftermath of the genocide. Seth Sendashonga was among several prominent Rwandese who had provided testimonies to non-governmental organizations and some foreign governments about large-scale massacres of mostly unarmed civilians by members of the RPF since April 1994, but these received little international attention at that time.

Seth Sendashonga was appointed Minister of Interior in the new Rwandese Government, until August 1995 when he and several other ministers were dismissed or forced to leave their posts. While in government, Seth Sendashonga had repeatedly complained to the most senior authorities about persistent human rights abuses committed by the RPF since 1994. One of the main reasons for his resignation was disillusion in the face of the government's lack of action to address the state of insecurity in Rwanda and continuing human rights violations by the Rwandese Patriotic Army (RPA), the new national army of Rwanda.

After leaving the government, he went to live in Kenya with his family and founded an unarmed political opposition group in exile, the *Forces de résistance pour la démocratie* (FRD), Resistance Forces for Democracy. The FRD regularly published statements describing ongoing abuses in Rwanda, including details of extrajudicial executions and "disappearances". Seth Sendashonga had also reportedly indicated his willingness to testify at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) in Arusha, Tanzania, as an expert witness for the defence in the ongoing trial of one of several people charged with participation in the genocide in Rwanda in 1994.

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