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DRC: Post-election intimidation through arrests must end

Security forces in Democratic Republic of Congo must halt a series of politically motivated arrests, including arbitrary and unlawful arrests following disputed elections, Amnesty International said today.

Dozens of arrests have been carried out across the country since the 28 November elections, frequently targeting members and supporters of the political opposition.

“The Congolese security forces seem to be taking advantage of the tense climate of uncertainty following the recent elections to carry out this series of politically motivated arrests, including unlawful and arbitrary arrests that threaten to stifle freedoms of expression and assembly,” said Paule Rigaud, Amnesty International’s Deputy Africa Programme Director.

“These arrests must end. Those detained must be released unless they are promptly charged with legitimate criminal offence and brought before a judge to challenge the legality of their detention with full respect of their fair trial rights, including access to a lawyer.”

Reports suggest that the practice is used as a method of intimidation and the victims include civilians, journalists, lawyers and opposition politicians, as well as some security force officers themselves.

Four community radio journalists were arrested by agents of the national intelligence agency (Agence nationale de renseignements, ANR) on 14 December, early morning, in Kabambare, in the eastern province of Maniema after being accused of violating an official decision to close down their radio station. Three of them were released in the afternoon the same day, while the fourth one was released on 15 December in the afternoon.

On 13 December in Bukavu, South Kivu, agents of the Congolese National Police (Police Nationale Congolaise, PNC) reportedly beaten and arrested lawyer Eustache Nsimba and brought him to an unknown location. He had been taking part in a march organized by the opposition. Bukavu’s mayor had been previously informed about the march but allegedly banned it during a radio announcement. Eustache Nsimba was released later the same day.

Amnesty international has also learned that security agents were involved in the arbitrary arrests of at least two Union for Democracy and Social Progress (Union pour la Démocratie et le Progrès Social, UDPS) members in Katanga province. Both members of the main opposition party are still being detained, with one of them held incommunicado at the ANR holding cell.

According to a local NGO, members of the national army (FARDC) have also reportedly abducted or arbitrarily arrested a dozen of other army officers and PNC agents as well as civilians since the beginning of December in Kinshasa. All those arrested were allegedly targeted because they come from Equateur province and the two Kasai provinces, two strongholds of the opposition.

The whereabouts of some of the detainees is unknown, while others are being detained incommunicado in

military camps in Kinshasa such as Kokolo camp or in other facilities that fall outside the scrutiny of any judicial authority, such as the Tshatshi camp and the Groupe Litho Moboti (GLM) Building.

Amnesty International urges the Congolese authorities to clarify the fate of those being detained, and release them if they are not promptly charged with a legitimate criminal offence, allowed to challenge the lawfulness of their continuing detention and granted access to their families and lawyers.

The organization also calls on the Congolese authorities to ensure a thorough, impartial and independent investigation is carried out into reported human rights violations, including unlawful killings of demonstrators, carried out by the DRC security forces and others in the immediate run-up to the elections.

“Numerous reports of human rights violations marred the run-up to the Congolese elections, and continue, with restrictions placed on freedom of expression and assembly, and security forces intimidating opposition supporters and human rights defenders,” said Paule Rigaud.

“All those responsible for such violations must be investigated and swiftly brought to justice. Impunity would only fuel further violence and abuses.”