

## Enforced Disappearances in East Africa: Rwanda and Uganda

By Andrea Barron

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**In Rwanda and Uganda, voices critical of the government are systematically silenced - including by the violent disappearance of the critics. In other cases, their family members disappear without a trace. For this article, the author spoke to those affected in both countries.**

Enforced disappearances first came to the attention of the broader international public during the military dictatorships in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s. In Argentina, the mothers of the disappeared regularly gathered in front of the Presidential Palace in Buenos Aires, becoming known as the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*. Since 1977, they have become a symbol of resistance to enforced disappearance and the demand for the truth about the whereabouts of the disappeared.

Enforced disappearance is defined in the [International Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance \(ICPPED\)](#), which came into force in 2010, as “the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty, or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law.”

The reasons behind enforced disappearances are varied. The aim is often to intimidate and silence the voices of political dissidents or those deemed to be dissidents. Armed non-state actors are also sometimes involved, victims are frequently tortured and killed --few ever reappear. Family members often do not receive any information about what happened to the missing person - they are left in a state of uncertainty, not knowing whether their loved ones are even alive, unable to bury their relatives or begin the grieving process. Once a common practice in military dictatorships, people are now being systematically disappeared in both authoritarian and formally democratic systems, such as Mexico.

The International Convention obliges the contracting states, among other things, to search for the missing person, investigate the circumstances of the disappearance, appropriately punish those responsible and take measures to prevent the crime. So far, the Convention has only been ratified by 68 states (as of April 1, 2022), including 18 countries in Africa.

Two East African countries, Rwanda and Uganda, have not yet ratified the Convention. Enforced disappearances have been reported regularly from both of them.

## Rwanda

Paul Kagame has been President of Rwanda since 2000. His rebels ended the 1994 genocide that killed more than 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus. Rwanda has since turned into a de facto centralized dictatorship. Since 1994, scores of government critics, including former members of the ruling *Rwandan Patriotic Front* (RPF) party, political opposition leaders and genocide survivors, have been imprisoned and there have been reports of enforced disappearances. The UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID) is currently investigating around 25 cases of enforced disappearances in Rwanda.



One such case was reported by Noël Zihabamwe, a Rwandan human rights activist who arrived in Australia as a refugee in 2006. His two brothers, Jean Nsengimana and Antoine Zihabamwe, disappeared on September 28, 2019 after Noël rejected an "offer" from the Rwandan government to spy on the Rwandan diaspora in Australia. As reported by [the Australian Broadcasting Corporation](#), Rwanda has a network of agents across Australia collecting information about the refugee community.

Noël's brothers, Jean and Antoine, were both married with children and were not involved in any political activity. Their disappearance has had a severe psychological and financial

*Photo: Noël Zihabamwe. He has lodged a complaint with the UN Working Group against Enforced Disappearances over the disappearances of his brothers in Rwanda.*

impact on their families. As Noël tells the *Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition (TASSC) International*, an anti-torture human rights organization based in Washington DC, he and his brothers' wives and children have "lived in a climate of uncertainty and great fear" ever since. He adds: "The children keep asking where their fathers are. No one can give them an answer. If my brothers had been murdered and we found their bodies, at least we could bury them with dignity and have a memorial service for them every year."



In order to represent the families of Rwandans who have disappeared from the Kagame regime, Noël founded the [Rwandan Accountability Initiative](#): an organization that – like similar initiatives

*Photo: Noël Zihabamwe's two missing brothers - Antoine Zihabamwe (left) and Jean Nsengimana (right)*

in Latin America, Asia, the Middle East and Europe – works to ensure justice for the relatives of the disappeared. His organization represents a new kind of initiative in sub-Saharan Africa. Since his case became public, hundreds of people have reached out to Noel.

A similar fate befell Innocent Bahati, a prominent young poet and teacher who was disappeared in February 2021 after publishing poetry on sensitive issues such as poverty and state oppression. Over 100 writers and artists then wrote a letter to President Kagame asking about what happened to Innocent. Rwandan authorities did not respond.

According to Claude Gatebuke, a well-known human rights activist and genocide survivor now based in the United States, there have been other disappearances of Rwandan dissidents. However, so far they have received less international attention than the cases of Innocent Bahati and Noël Zihabamwe's brothers.

## Uganda

In Uganda, north of Rwanda, people were systematically kidnapped, tortured and enforced disappearances before, during and after the presidential election of January 14, 2021. President Yoweri Museveni came to power in a military coup in 1986. Now 77, he rules the country with an iron fist, relying on the security forces to repress opposition supporters, often with violence. *As reported in Human Rights Watch's recent report, "I Only Need Justice," Unlawful Detention and Abuse in Unauthorized Places of Detention in Uganda*, the kidnappings began in 2018 and increased dramatically with the January 2021 elections. The election was particularly controversial as Museveni had a strong challenger - Robert Kyagulanyi, a popular musician who became a politician. He is also known by the stage name Bobi Wine.

State agents have kidnapped hundreds of government critics and opposition supporters. The agents abduct people from their homes or workplaces in unmarked vehicles called "drones" and take them to so-called "safe houses," where they are illegally detained, interrogated and often tortured.

The kidnapping and torture operations in Uganda are directed by the domestic intelligence agency. The head of this agency was recently appointed as Uganda's ambassador to Angola for his "good work."

Human rights defender and torture survivor Ismael Serunjogi fears that repression in Uganda could increase this year despite all the international attention on human rights abuses there. This is so Museveni can prepare his son Muhoozi Kainerugaba, a major general in the Ugandan army, to replace him. In order to facilitate Kainerugaba's transition, Museveni must silence as many opposition supporters as possible.

## Appeal to the international community

Human rights activists such as Ismael from Uganda and Noël and Claude from Rwanda are calling on the international community to pressure the governments of these countries to end kidnapping, torture and enforced disappearances. The two countries must ratify the

International Convention against Enforced Disappearance and hold accountable those who seek to silence dissident voices and threaten brave human rights defenders and their families.

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