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Rwanda: Number of prisoners of conscience on the rise

Amnesty International today called on the government of Rwanda to immediately and unconditionally release 20 men and women detained in recent months seemingly for their entirely non-violent and legitimate connection with imprisoned former President and opposition politician, Pasteur Bizimungu. The organization also calls for the unconditional release of prisoners of conscience Pasteur Bizimungu and his political ally Charles Ntakirutinka.

Amnesty International believes that these people are prisoners of conscience, detained solely for their perceived or actual peaceful political affiliations.

The 20 detainees, who include peasant farmers, teachers, accountants, civil servants and shopkeepers, are suspected of belonging to Pasteur Bizimungu's banned political party, the *Parti Démocratique pour le Renouveau - UBUYANJA* (PDR-UBUYANJA), Democratic Party for Renewal - UBUYANJA.

Amnesty International fears that the 20 detainees risk intimidation or ill-treatment by the authorities in order to coerce them into making statements incriminating Pasteur Bizimungu or his political allies.

Pasteur Bizimungu, former president of Rwanda under the current Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF)-led government, and Charles Ntakirutinka, a former Minister of Public Works, were arrested on 19 and 20 April 2002 respectively, after attempting to launch PDR-UBUYANJA in May 2001. The two men have been held on remand in Kigali central prison since their arrests, on charges of threatening state security ("*atteinte à la surêté de l'état*"), a charge that carries a maximum prison sentence of 10 years, and criminal association ("*association de malfaiteurs*"). Pasteur Bizimungu is also charged with illegal possession of a firearm.

No credible evidence has been adduced to support these charges and Amnesty International believes that these two men should be immediately released, all charges against them dropped and be allowed to exercise fully their right to freedom of

expression and association.

Rwandese President Paul Kagame has repeatedly stated that his government is prepared to respect freedom of expression and political pluralism, but will not tolerate those who, in his government's view, promote sectarianism or division among the Rwandese people.

However, the list of those his government refuses to tolerate now embraces large sections of Rwandese society, including independent journalists, advocates for peace and reconciliation, and people who seek to offer an alternative peaceful political voice.

Amnesty International is concerned that the government's clamp down on peaceful political dissent may create a dangerous context for future political violence. "In attempting to silence legitimate criticism and dissent, the RPF government risks creating the very divisions it says it wishes to avoid. The result is a growing, pervasive climate of fear in Rwanda," the organization added.

Background

Those reported detained are: (from Gisenyi) Agnès Bazubafite (f), Jean-Claude Nshimyumukiza, Obed Nsengiyumva, Jean-Damascène Kazimanyi, Bareberaho, Mwanguzi, Bazimenyera, Evariste Ntakirutimana, Aloys Bizimana, Suzanne Mukabigega (f) and Ndisebuye; (from Kigali) Philémon Munyaneza, Charles Nshimyumukiza, Grégoire Uzabakiriho, Jean-de-Dieu Nyamucihakomeye, Valens Munyaneza, Joseph Gasasira, Emmanuel Ngayaberura, DamascPne Ndahayo and Damascène Nsengimana.

PDR-UBUYANJA was banned by the government in June 2000. Its founders have faced repeated harassment from the authorities. On 26 December 2001 one of the party's founders, Gratien Munyarubuga, was shot dead in Kigali by unidentified assailants, suspected to be government agents.

Others who have been detained, intimidated or forced into exile by the government in recent months include peace workers for the non-governmental organization *Association Modeste et Innocent* (AMI), the Modeste and Innocent Association, members of a legal opposition party, the *Mouvement Démocratique Républicain* (MDR), Democratic Republican Movement, and several newspaper journalists. With one exception, independent media reporting in Rwanda has effectively ceased to exist.

Public Document

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