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For Immediate Release

Rwanda: Opposition Activist Missing

Another Party Member Detained; Journalist Dropped From Sight

(Nairobi, September 29, 2016) – A [Rwandan](#) opposition activist has been missing for six months and is feared to have been forcibly disappeared, Human Rights Watch said today. People close to the activist, Illuminée Iragena, have not seen her since March 26, 2016, and fear she may have died in detention.

In an apparently related case, just hours before Iragena dropped from sight, Léonille Gasengayire, a member of the FDU-Inkingi opposition party, was arrested after visiting Victoire Ingabire, her party's president, in prison. Gasengayire was accused of bringing Ingabire a copy of a book Ingabire had written. Apparently, Iragena had helped arrange its delivery. The police released Gasengayire three days later, but rearrested her on August 23.

“The Rwandan government should step up efforts to find out what happened to Illuminée Iragena,” said [Daniel Bekele](#), Africa director at Human Rights Watch. “If she is in detention, the authorities should reveal her whereabouts and either promptly charge and try her, or release her. If she has died, they should make public the circumstances of her death.”

Human Rights Watch has documented several disappearances, politically motivated arrests, and unlawful detentions in Rwanda, especially of suspected government opponents or critics. With less than one year to go before the country's August 2017 presidential elections, political space remains very limited, with tight restrictions on freedom of expression and association.

Iragena is a member of the FDU-Inkingi and had been a candidate for the Social Democratic Party in the 2008 legislative elections. She regularly visited [Victoire Ingabire](#) in prison, where Ingabire is serving a 15-year sentence for conspiracy against the government and genocide denial. Iragena is married to Martin Ntavuka, the FDU-Inkingi's former representative for Rwanda's capital, Kigali, who has been arrested at least twice since 2010 in connection with his political activities. On July 8, 2011, the police briefly detained Iragena and Ntavuka after they went to prison to visit Ingabire and members of the [PS-Imberakuri](#), another opposition party.

Iragena left her house in Murama, Gasabo district, on the outskirts of Kigali, on the evening of March 26, to go to work at the King Faisal Hospital, where she is a nurse. She never arrived. Family members asked the police to investigate, but did not receive an official response.

People close to Iragena believe she was unlawfully detained and tortured, and there are unconfirmed reports that she may have died. Human Rights Watch has been unable to verify this information, but is concerned about her fate and well-being, and about the lack of information on her whereabouts.

Police arrested Léonille Gasengayire on March 26, in the premises of Kigali Central Prison.

The warrant for Gasengayire's arrest indicated that she was accused of inciting insurrection or trouble among the population, apparently for bringing the book to Ingabire. Police beat her in Remera police station and questioned her about the book, Iragena, and Ingabire. Iragena's name was handwritten in the book. The police denied Gasengayire access to a lawyer. They released her three days later without charge, after she signed a statement admitting that Iragena gave her the book and she gave it to Ingabire. But they rearrested her on August 23, in Kivumu, Rutsiro district, and charged her with inciting insurrection or trouble among the population.

In a court hearing in Ruhango, Rutsiro district, on September 13, the prosecutor accused Gasengayire of stirring up local opposition to expropriations to build a new village, of criticizing the government for not providing adequate compensation, and of promoting the FDU-Inkingi, which has been prevented from registering as a political party. Gasengayire and her lawyer denied the charges, saying they were politically motivated. On September 14, the court decided to keep Gasengayire in pretrial detention for 30 days. If found guilty, she could be sentenced to up to 15 years in prison.

Gasengayire had previously been arrested in September 2012, along with other FDU-Inkingi members, for attending a party meeting in Kivumu. She was sentenced to two years in prison on July 11, 2013, together with five co-accused, for concealing an offense, and released on September 5, 2014. Sylvain Sibomana, the party's secretary-general, and Anselme Mutuyimana, a party member, who were each sentenced to six years for organizing the meeting, remain in prison.

On September 18, 2016, Théophile Ntirutwa, the current Kigali representative of the FDU-Inkingi, was arrested, allegedly by military personnel, in Nyarutarama, in Kigali. He was detained in a location he did not recognize, beaten, and questioned about his membership of the FDU-Inkingi. He was released two days later.

Ntirutwa had informed the authorities several times in recent years about threats and harassment. In November 2015, he told the police, the National Commission for Human Rights, and local and national authorities that he had been threatened after he refused to sign a petition in favor of constitutional amendments and to contribute money to the Rwandan Patriotic Front, the ruling party.

Very few opposition politicians are able to function in Rwanda, and human rights organizations and independent media are weak. In the period before the 2010 presidential elections, Human Rights Watch [reported a worrying pattern](#) of abuses against opposition parties, journalists, activists, and other critics. Since then, Human Rights Watch has continued to document abuses and incidents of intimidation of journalists.

John Ndabarasa, a journalist at Sana Radio, was last seen in the Kicukiro district of Kigali, on August 7. On August 30, the police told the news media that they had opened an investigation after the Rwanda Media Commission, a media self-regulation body, informed them about the case.

A friend of Ndabarasa received a message, allegedly from Ndabarasa, saying he was going abroad. People close to Iragena said that after she disappeared, they had received similar messages, allegedly from Iragena. Neither Ndabarasa's family nor Iragena's believe that their loved one has left the country.

It is unclear whether Ndabarasa has gone missing because of his activities as a journalist. Ndabarasa is a family member of Joel Mutabazi, a former presidential bodyguard who was [forcibly returned](#) from Uganda to Rwanda in 2013, and was sentenced to life in prison in October 2014 for security-related offenses. Mutabazi's younger brother, Jackson Karemera, was sentenced to four months in prison in the same trial but released after the verdict. Karemera was rearrested and his current whereabouts are unknown.

Human Rights Watch wrote to the Rwandan Justice Ministry on September 2 and 22, requesting information about these individual cases. The ministry responded that it was following up the cases, but did not provide further information.

In its July road map for carrying out the recommendations of the [Universal Periodic Review by the Human Rights Council in Geneva](#), the Rwandan government said it would eliminate all provisions that undermine freedom of expression in an ongoing review of laws on the media and political parties. The penal code is also under review.

“The cases of Illuminée Iragena, Léonille Gasengayire and John Ndabarasa are a test of the Rwandan government’s commitment to uphold civil and political rights,” Bekele said. “With the 2017 presidential elections on the horizon, the Rwandan government should show its willingness to investigate alleged abuses against journalists and opposition activists – a precondition to creating a conducive environment for free and fair elections.”

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