

Press Release

DR Congo: The right to defend human rights is greatly threatened in these difficult times of COVID-19

Nairobi (Kenya), 9th June 2020 – Protection International is concerned about the deteriorating situation of women and men human rights defenders (W/HRDs) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo) and calls for an independent and impartial investigation into the recent killings of human rights defenders in the east of the country.

Protection International was shocked to learn of the violent assassinations of two human rights defenders, one in Beni (North Kivu Province), and the other in Djugu Territory (Ituri Province) at the end of May 2020. On the 21st of the month, during a peaceful demonstration to protest against repeated killings in Beni and its surroundings, [Freddy Kambale](#), a member of the citizen movement *Lutte pour le changement* (Fight for Change – Lucha), was shot in the head by a Congolese police officer.

Following this murder, several peaceful demonstrations took place in Beni and in the Territory of Rutshuru (North Kivu Province), which the security forces violently repressed. On 26th May, police arrested at least seven Lucha activists who were organising a peaceful demonstration in Rutshuru in memory of their murdered colleague in Beni.

In the eastern part of the DR Congo (mostly the provinces of North Kivu and Ituri) insecurity is currently on the rise with civilian populations paying the highest toll. Between October 2019 and April 2020, the United Nations Joint Human Rights Office (UNJHRO) has documented at least [296 people killed, 151 others wounded and 38 people raped in Ituri Province alone](#), including several women and children.

On 22nd May, Protection International also became aware that Patrick Shako, human rights defender and president of the civil society organization of Walendu Djatsi Sud in Ituri, was killed by militia members of the *Coopérative pour le développement du Congo* (Cooperative for the development of the Congo – CODECO). According to local sources, the victim was abducted on 21st May and then murdered the next day in unclear circumstances while he was in the midst of a peace awareness campaign about 10 km from the centre of Bambu, where he was calling on the population to dissociate themselves from armed groups.

"These umpteenth murders illustrate the increasing number of violations against defenders in the DR Congo. Protection International urges the Congolese authorities at all levels to urgently increase their efforts to protect human rights defenders and bring to justice those responsible for these heinous acts. To do otherwise encourages impunity," said Susan Muriungi, Regional Director of Protection International Africa.

Following the state of health emergency and other restrictive measures adopted by the Congolese government to fight COVID-19, an increasing number of human rights violations (intimidation, arbitrary arrests, and

restrictions on individual liberties and press freedom) were also reported in the provinces of Mongala, Sud-Ubangi, Tshuapa and Equateur.

In the Province of Mongala, [the governor ordered the shutdown of four radio stations](#) in the city of Bumba, as well as the imprisonment of a journalist and three activists of the citizens' movement *Mpo Na Ekolo* (For the Nation). In the neighbouring province of South-Ubangi, Protection International was also informed of the arrest last May of a journalist working for *Radio Gemena* on the orders of the provincial governor.

The authorities of the DR Congo have the obligation to protect both women and men human rights defenders against any form of violation of their most fundamental rights. The authorities must ensure that W/HRDs are granted the possibility to exercise their right to defend human rights in conditions guaranteeing their physical integrity.

It is for this reason that Protection International urges the Congolese authorities to:

- Conduct a rigorous and transparent ongoing investigation into the alleged perpetrators of the assassination of Freddy Kambale to ensure accountability at all levels;
- Promptly launch a judicial investigation into the murder of Patrick Shako in order to identify those responsible and bring them to justice;
- Immediately and unconditionally, release the human rights defenders currently imprisoned, including those in pre-trial detention;
- Lift current restrictions on freedom of expression, demonstration and press freedom;
- Prohibit the use of lethal weapons by law enforcement officials to control or disperse peaceful public demonstrations.

About Protection International in DR Congo.

Protection International is an international non-profit organization. We support human rights defenders in developing their security and protection management strategies in more than 30 countries. Since 2004, we have been working with local civil society partners in the Democratic Republic of Congo. For more information on our work in DR Congo, click [here](#).