

Uganda 2024 Human Rights Report

Executive Summary

There were negative developments in the human rights situation in Uganda during the year.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: arbitrary or unlawful killings; disappearances; torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; arbitrary arrest or detention; transnational repression against individuals in another country; unlawful recruitment or use of children in armed conflict by nonstate armed groups; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including violence or threats of violence against journalists, and censorship; and significant presence of any of the worst forms of child labor.

The government did not take credible steps or action to identify and punish officials who committed human rights abuses.

The rebel group Allied Democratic Forces continued to threaten attacks in urban areas while fighting government forces. The government arrested and prosecuted multiple individuals accused of belonging to or supporting the group.

Section 1. Life

a. Extrajudicial Killings

There were several reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings during the year.

Opposition activists, local media, and human rights defenders reported security forces killed individuals identified as dissidents or opposition party members the government accused of criminal activity.

On February 2, former opposition leader Mathias Mpuuga accused police of killing a National Unity Platform (NUP) supporter in Kasese after witnesses observed his forced abduction into an unmarked white van prior to his transfer to Kasese Prison. Three days later a police spokesperson claimed the victim slipped on a bathroom floor and died as a result of injuries sustained in the fall. There were no reports of an investigation or punishment of the officials involved in the killing.

Human rights activists and journalists reported the indiscriminate use of force by government forces in so-called disarmament operations in the conflict-plagued northeastern Karamoja region

b. Coercion in Population Control

There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the

part of government authorities.

c. War Crimes, Crimes against Humanity, and Evidence of Acts that May Constitute Genocide, or Conflict-Related Abuses

On August 13, the International Crimes Division of the High Court convicted former Lord's Resistance Army commander Thomas Kwoyelo on 44 counts of crimes against humanity, war crimes, and other crimes, including murder, rape, enslavement, and torture committed during the Northern Uganda conflict. Kwoyelo had been in detention since 2009.

Section 2. Liberty

a. Freedom of the Press

The constitution and law provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, but the government often restricted this right.

The government restricted some citizens from criticizing its actions and officials or discussing some matters of public interest. In February, police arrested Ibrahim Musana for defamation, promoting hate speech, and incitement to violence related to social media posts that allegedly insulted President Yoweri Museveni, the King of Buganda, Speaker of Parliament

Anita Among, and State Minister for Information Communication Technology Joyce Nabbosa Ssebugwawo. Musana was released on bail in April.

An investigative civil society organization released reports via a social media campaign in February and March alleging members of parliament inappropriately used public funds to enrich themselves. Following the publication of the reports, the organization received dozens of harassing calls from security service members and political supporters of the accused legislators. A contributor to the reports went into hiding for two weeks due to credible information that security forces would arrest him.

Physical Attacks, Imprisonment, and Pressure

Security forces subjected journalists and media houses to violence, harassment, and intimidation. Local media and media freedom activists reported numerous incidents of security officials, local government officials, and private individuals with connections to government officials assaulting journalists in the course of their work.

On August 5, four journalists were attacked by police while filming a protest by a political opposition party. Three of the journalists were injured during the attack, and one had his equipment destroyed by security officers.

An April report from the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Africa Centre for Media Excellence noted state actors tracked SIM cards in the cell phones

of journalists and human rights defenders, violating their anonymity, to inhibit the publishing of sensitive reporting. The same report cited numerous reports from journalists whose ability to report anonymously or disguise their identity was compromised by those they were investigating and who threatened the journalists with arrest. The report estimated 60 percent of journalists believed compulsory registration of SIM cards and national identification cards made their work less safe and had increased self-censorship.

Censorship by Governments, Military, Intelligence, or Police Forces, Criminal Groups, or Armed Extremist or Rebel Groups

Journalists, opposition politicians, and human rights activists reported authorities wielded control over editorial decisions at public broadcasters and at some private media outlets as well. The government penalized those who published items contrary to its guidelines and directly and indirectly censored media, including by controlling licensing and advertising and instructing editors to suspend critical journalists. Press freedom activists reported the government used advertising to control editorial coverage of private media organizations.

Government officials and ruling party members owned many of the private rural radio stations and imposed reporting restrictions. Media practitioners stated government and security agents occasionally called editors and

instructed them to refrain from publishing stories portraying the government negatively, hosting critical commentators on radio and television talk shows, and discussing some political matters. The police Media and Political Crimes Unit and communications regulator Uganda Communications Commission closely monitored all radio, television, and print media.

b. Worker Rights

Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining

The law provided for workers, except members of the armed forces, to form and join independent unions, bargain collectively, and conduct legal strikes. Unions registered with the Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development could engage in collective bargaining. The law required the completion of labor union registration within 90 days, and the registrar authority could suspend and interdict an elected union officer if the officer was convicted by a court of law or under investigation with potential prosecution. The law gave the registrar authority to cancel a union's registration if the union's principal objectives or constitution became unlawful. The law did not define what constituted unlawful objectives. The law precluded noncitizens from becoming members of the executive committee of a trade union. The law gave the registrar authority to inspect the trade union books of account and membership.

The law allowed unions to conduct activities without interference, prohibited antiunion discrimination by employers, and provided for reinstatement of workers dismissed for union activity. The law also empowered the labor minister and labor officers to refer disputes to the Industrial Court if initial mediation and arbitration attempts failed. The law gave government labor officers power to declare industrial actions illegal if a labor officer took steps to resolve the labor dispute in question through conciliation. The government failed to recruit an adequate number of judicial officers to the Industrial Court, which delayed resolution of cases.

The government did not effectively enforce the law. Civil society organizations stated labor ministry officials failed to hire, train, and equip labor officers to enforce labor laws effectively. Employers who violated a worker's right to form and join a trade union or bargain collectively faced penalties that were not commensurate with similar abuses, and penalties were rarely applied against violators. Administrative and judicial procedures were subject to lengthy delays and appeals. The NGO Platform for Labor Action (PLA) reported some companies refused to honor awards handed down by the Industrial Courts, and workers were forced to incur additional costs for the proceedings.

The government and employers generally did not respect the constitutionally protected rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining. The law did not provide trade union federations with a right to

engage in collective bargaining and further imposed mandatory conciliation to resolve labor disputes before a strike action was recognized. The law gave the government the right to declare a strike illegal, and the labor minister had authority to refer a dispute to the Industrial Court. The PLA reported limited opportunities for workers in informal sectors such as domestic work, artisanal mining, and transportation to exercise their freedom of association and organize collective bargaining measures. The government restricted some union activity through issuance of threats and harassment of union leaders, especially of medical workers' unions. The law required trade unions to provide notice of a strike and adhere to the time limits set for public meetings.

Public servants and medical workers staged strikes during the year, largely regarding delayed salaries and undelivered promises of salary raises. On May 15, police fired tear gas and arrested nine medical interns protesting delayed hospital assignments and stoppage of allowance payments following unsuccessful negotiations between the Uganda Medical Association and the Office of the Prime Minister.

Forced or Compulsory Labor

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Acceptable Work Conditions

Wage and Hour Laws

The law technically provided for a national minimum wage that was much lower than the government's official poverty income level. This minimum wage standard was never implemented, and the minimum wage remained unchanged at the 1984 level of 130,000 Ugandan shillings (\$35.50) per month.

The maximum legal workweek was 48 hours, and the maximum workday was 10 hours. The law provided the workweek could be extended to 56 hours, including overtime, with the employee's consent. An employee could work more than 10 hours in a single day if the average number of hours over a period of three weeks did not exceed 10 hours per day or 56 hours per week. For employees who worked beyond 48 hours in a single week, the law required employers to pay a minimum of 1.5 times the employee's normal hourly rate for the overtime hours, and twice the employee's normal hourly rate for work on public holidays. According to labor rights organizations, violations of wage, hour, or overtime laws were common in the informal sector, particularly in domestic work, agriculture, manufacturing, and mining. The PLA reported employers regularly abused overtime laws because of poor enforcement of labor standards, lack of social protections, and high unemployment.

Occupational Safety and Health

The law established appropriate occupational safety and health (OSH) standards and regulations for all workers. These standards were appropriate for the main industries in the country. The law authorized labor inspectors in the Ministry of Labour's Department of Occupational Safety and Health to access and examine any workplace unannounced, issue fines, and mediate some labor disputes. While the law allowed workers to remove themselves from situations endangering their health or safety without jeopardizing their employment, legal protection for such workers was ineffective. According to the PLA, most workers were unaware of their employers' responsibility to ensure a safe working environment, and many did not challenge unsafe working conditions due to fear of losing their jobs.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement

The Ministry of Labour and local government labor offices were responsible for enforcement of wage and hour laws, but the government did not effectively enforce them. Inspection was insufficient to enforce compliance. In addition to inspectors, labor officers conducted inspections of worksites and examined standards of employment and workers' rights more broadly. Labor officers had the authority to make unannounced inspections, initiate sanctions, instigate prosecutions of repeat offenders through the Industrial Court, and close worksites. Labor officers often depended on complainants and local civil society organizations for travel to inspection sites. PLA

officials reported many labor officers served concurrently as social workers and did labor-related work only when a complainant reported an abuse. PLA officials also reported companies often did not respect recommendations made by labor officers during workplace inspections, including providing contracts or protective wear, or they bribed labor officers to prevent them from issuing penalties.

Authorities rarely enforced labor laws on wages and hours, and penalties were not commensurate with those for similar abuses. Penalties were rarely applied against violators. The legal minimum wage was never implemented, and civil society organizations reported most domestic employees worked all year without leave. Wage arrears were common in both the public and private sectors. Workers' claims for overtime wages were difficult to enforce as they lacked documentation of their accumulated hours. PLA officials reported abuses of standard wages and overtime pay were common in the manufacturing, education, private security, retail, agriculture, private health care, domestic work, and transport sectors.

The same inspectors conducted wage, hour, and OSH inspections. Authorities rarely enforced OSH laws, and penalties were not commensurate with those for similar abuses. Penalties were rarely enforced against violators. Workers in the mining, construction, and textile sectors faced hazardous and exploitive working conditions. The PLA reported abuses of safety and health standards were common in the

manufacturing, education, private security, and transport sectors.

According to 2021 government statistics, the most recent available, the informal sector, excluding agriculture, employed up to 88 percent of the labor force, primarily in the service industry, trade, domestic work, construction, and transport. The government did not enforce labor laws in the informal economy.

c. Disappearance and Abduction

Disappearance

There were reports of enforced disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities. Local media, opposition political parties, and human rights lawyers stated police, the Internal Security Organization, and military, including the Defense Intelligence and Security (DIS) and the Special Forces Command, abducted and held citizens at unidentified detention facilities without charge. Members of the political opposition and environmental protesters were particularly targeted.

Following the attempted arrest of an environmental activist by the Special Forces Command at a June 1 protest in Hoima, his family reported him missing on June 4. Local residents found the activist coughing up blood and unable to communicate on a roadside on June 10.

On January 8, the chair of the Uganda Human Rights Commission, an entity

mandated by the constitution, disputed the disappearance of 18 NUP party supporters, some missing since 2019, claiming the individuals “either don’t exist or are very much alive living overseas.” On January 19, the families of the 18 missing persons petitioned the High Court requesting the presentation of their family members before a judge. On April 8, the government announced security forces were unable to locate 11 of the 18 missing NUP supporters, claiming these individuals were never in police custody. The government did not produce the remaining seven individuals for the hearing, claiming they had already been released from detention.

Prolonged Detention without Charges

The constitution and law prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention and provided for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court. The government generally did not observe these requirements.

The law required judges or prosecutors to issue a warrant before authorities made an arrest unless the arrest occurred during commission of a crime or while in pursuit of a perpetrator, but authorities often arrested suspects without warrants. The law required authorities to arraign suspects within 48 hours of arrest, but they frequently held suspects longer without charge. Some detainees remained in detention for long periods without a court appearance. Authorities were required to try suspects arrested for capital offenses within 360 days (120 days if charged with an offense triable by

subordinate courts) or release them on bail. If prosecutors presented the case to a court within this time, however, there was no limit on further pretrial detention. While the law required authorities to inform detainees immediately of the reason for detention, at times they did not do so.

The law provided for bail at the judge's discretion, but many suspects were unaware of the law or lacked the financial means to pay bail fees. Judges generally granted requests for bail. Human rights organizations reported illiterate persons were disproportionately more likely to come into conflict with the law and be detained, which led to high rates of abuse of rights to bail and police bond due to a lack of awareness of the right and an inability to afford legal services. The law provided detainees the right to legal representation and access to a lawyer, but authorities did not always respect this right. The law required the government to provide an attorney for indigent defendants charged with capital offenses, and the government adhered to this requirement. Political opposition and terrorism suspects were often held incommunicado for extensive periods.

Arbitrary arrests and unlawful detention, particularly of political opposition supporters, journalists, environmental activists, citizens in the Karamoja region, and protesters, were widespread.

Throughout the year, police and military officials arrested and harassed opposition supporters. There were numerous abuses similar to the following example. On August 5, police arrested 14 opposition Patriotic

Freedom Front officials as they marched in protest to the Kenyan embassy regarding the July detention of 36 youth activists who were arrested in Kenya and brought back to Uganda on terrorism-related charges. Police charged the party officials with “participating in unlawful assembly activities” and “public nuisance.”

In a 2023 annual report, the Ministry of Justice reported 48 percent of prisoners were in pretrial detention. Factors contributing to prolonged pretrial detention included case backlogs due to an inefficient judiciary, inadequate police investigations, insufficient use of bail, and the absence of a time limit for the detention of detainees awaiting trial. There was insufficient information available to determine whether the length of pretrial detention frequently equaled or exceeded the maximum sentence for an alleged crime.

d. Violations in Religious Freedom

See the Department of State’s annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

e. Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State’s annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Section 3. Security of the Person

a. Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The constitution and law prohibited such practices, but there were credible reports government agents tortured and physically abused detainees, according to media, opposition political parties, and human rights activists.

On September 3, police officers shot NUP presidential candidate Robert Kyangulanyi (also known as Bobi Wine) in the leg with a tear gas cannister after he left the home of an NUP lawyer. Video of the incident showed officers discharging nonlethal weapons at NUP supporters from close range, including an officer who fired a cannister between Wine's legs; the cannister exploded and lodged two pieces of shrapnel in Wine's leg. A police statement claimed Wine injured himself while getting into his vehicle. Following the incident, Wine was hospitalized for lower-leg injuries, which limited his ability to walk. On September 4, authorities announced an investigation into the matter, but no results were released as of year's end.

Government officials reportedly committed acts of sexual violence. NGOs reported police medical staff subjected at least 15 persons to forced anal examinations following their arrests. Opposition protesters stated security forces used or threatened to use forced anal examinations during

interrogations.

Allegations of abuse and torture were often associated with detainees held at the police Special Investigations Unit facility at Kireka and the nearby DIS headquarters in Mbuya.

Impunity was widespread within the police, prison, and executive branch security services, as well as the military. Abuse victims identified DIS personnel in multiple cases of cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment of detainees. Security forces did not take adequate measures to investigate and punish officers implicated in human rights abuses. There were no public reports of disciplinary actions against security personnel accused of torture or abuse during the year.

The law prohibited female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) and established a maximum penalty of 10 years' imprisonment for perpetrators or life imprisonment if the victim died. The government did not effectively enforce the law.

b. Protection of Children

Child Labor

See the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings/>.

Child Soldiers

The terrorist group Allied Democratic Forces continued the recruitment of children for its armed rebellion in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). On April 10, Muslim leaders in Busia warned followers against extremist recruitment after two local youths were arrested and accused of planning to join the group. For a detailed accounting of conflict abuses, see the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the DRC.

In July, a UN Group of Experts on the DRC alleged the government provided active support to the March 23 Movement, a nonstate armed group that forcibly recruited and used child soldiers in the conflict in the eastern DRC. The government denied the allegation. On September 10, security forces arrested three DRC nationals for recruiting 32 DRC national refugees, including four girls, at the Kyangwali Refugee Settlement. The government charged the recruiters with trafficking in persons.

Child Marriage

The legal minimum age for marriage was 18, but authorities generally did not enforce this law. Child marriages were prevalent. Local media, human rights activists, political leaders, and police reported some communities forced girls into marriage, particularly along the eastern border of the country. Activists noted police classified cases of child marriage as statutory rape, referred to locally as “defilement,” indicating the potential for a higher

number of child marriages than captured in official reports. Officials stated some parents married off girls they could not financially support in return for payment. Children's rights activists reported some parents forced child survivors of statutory rape to marry their abusers if the child became pregnant. Officials from local government and police partnered with cultural institutions and civil society organizations to carry out community sensitization campaigns in rural areas to speak out against the practice.

Humanitarian workers reported some refugee girls were forced into early marriage, sent by their families into South Sudan to avoid prosecution or annulment, and then brought back to the country months later. The government, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and humanitarian NGOs took steps to prevent or dissolve early and child marriages, although they were not always successful. Additionally, media reported arrests and prosecutions of the parents of child brides.

c. Protection to Refugees

The government cooperated with UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern.

Provision of First Asylum

The law provided for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the

government had a system for providing protection to refugees. Individuals from Sudan, South Sudan, and the eastern DRC who entered the country through a designated border post had prima facie refugee status (status without requiring individual determination of refugee status). The government Refugee Eligibility Committee determined refugee status. The committee was functional, but administrative matters and the influx of asylum seekers caused backlogs despite efforts by UNHCR and the government to expedite the process.

d. Acts of Antisemitism and Antisemitic Incitement

The Jewish population numbered between 2,000 and 3,000 members centered around the Mbale District. There were no reports of antisemitic incidents.

e. Instances of Transnational Repression

According to human rights groups, media, and opposition figures, the government engaged in actions of transnational repression.

Threats, Harassment, Surveillance, or Coercion

Human rights activists, journalists, and opposition politicians located outside the country reported regular threats, harassment, surveillance, and coercion from security officials.

On August 7, Ugandan Ambassador to Canada Joy Ruth Acheng reportedly confronted NUP supporters in Toronto, telling protesters to “stop abducting yourselves and killing yourselves, saying it is President Museveni” while also threatening to have them deported from Canada.

Bilateral Pressure

On July 23, 36 activists from the opposition party Forum for Democratic Change attending a youth leadership event were arrested in Kisumu, Kenya by Kenyan security forces and transported to Uganda, where they were detained and charged with “terrorism-related offences.” One of the arrested youths was a registered political asylee who had lived in Kenya since 2012. At year’s end, none of the 36 activists were granted bail, and they remained in custody awaiting trial.

In November, security forces arrested opposition Patriotic Freedom Front party leader Keeza Besigye in Kisumu, Kenya, brought him back to Uganda, and charged him in a military court with illegal possession of arms and undermining national security. At year’s end, Besigye remained detained in a military barracks awaiting trial and was denied bail.