

BI-ANNUAL HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

A Report on the Human Rights Situation in 14 Target Districts in Uganda

October 2023 – March 2024





Chapter Four Uganda is an independent, non-partisan, non-governmental organization, established in 2013, to defend civil liberties and promote human rights for all. We provide bold and innovative legal response through strategic and public interest litigation, legal representation in first line response cases, legal research, general counsel for civil society organizations and strategic advocacy. We work with the most vulnerable and underrepresented sections of the society.

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This 1st Bi-Annual Human Rights Report is a publication of Chapter Four Uganda. It provides a brief on our findings of the human rights situations in 14 project target districts in Uganda.

The publication is a product of an activity under the project titled, “Human Rights – Our Concern!” which aims at strengthening evidence-based advocacy in order to safeguard respect for human rights and freedoms in Uganda. Chapter Four is implementing the project in partnership with the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS Uganda) and the African Institute for Investigative Journalism (AIJ).

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INTRODUCTION

Chapter Four Uganda presents this bi-annual report providing an assessment of the human rights situation for the period of **October 2023** to **March 2024** in the 14 target districts of Uganda where a project titled, *“Human Rights – Our Concern!”* is being implemented in partnership with the African Institute for Investigative Journalism (AIJ), with support from the the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS Uganda) and the European Union (EU).

The project aims to strengthen evidence-based advocacy for the protection and promotion of human rights and freedoms in Uganda.

The 14 districts covered under this report include Wakiso, Kampala, Adjumani, Arua, Gulu, Hoima, Kasese, Kisoro, Kitgum, Kotido, Kween, Mbale, Moroto, and Otuke.

The report focuses on five civil liberties namely the freedom of expression, including freedom of the press and other media; the freedom of association; the freedom of peaceful assembly; respect for the integrity of the person; and fair trial and due process rights.

At the onset of the project, over 80 human rights defenders were identified and trained on how to safely monitor and document incidents of human rights violations. After the capacity building engagement, a core group of 14 monitors were selected to work with the other defenders in the districts to monitor the human rights situation.

We commend their commitment in contributing to this report despite the challenges some of them continuously face in their human rights work.

Chapter Four hopes that this report challenges all relevant stakeholders to reflect on the human right situation and avenues of addressing the emerging concerns.

SUMMARY

The human rights situation in the 14 target districts in Uganda is generally fragile. Several incidents of citizens facing impediments in accessing or exercising their civil liberties were documented. The number of incidents of violations vary from district to district, amidst general concerns of closing civic space. Where incidents of violations have been reported, victims and survivors often face significant impediments in accessing justice and seeking accountability.

On the freedom of expression, including freedom of the press and other media, several incidents of targeting of human rights defenders, including journalists and activists, for expressing dissent or asking critical questions were documented. Incidents of threats and adverse action were reported. The perpetrators included local government leaders, police officers and other security operatives working with other government security agencies.

Freedom of press was violated by the police through harassment, arrests, confiscation and damaging of equipment belonging to affected journalists.

Self-censorship arising from fear of reprisal in form of arbitrary arrests, harassment and intimidation for reporting on human rights concerns. For media houses owned by pro-government supporters, interference with editorial independence was reported.

Bureaucracy and limited information on procedures to access information from governments institutions are cited as key challenges to access to information. There were reported incidents of threats and intimidation where duty bearers thought that the information sought was sensitive. This approach to requests for information disempowers citizens' effective scrutiny and participation in government decisions that affect them.

On the freedom of association, many human rights defenders reported facing multiple obstacles in registering non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations. Some of the concerns included the onerous registration procedure and the opaque multiple pre-registration processes at the local government and government ministries and agencies.

This report further documents concerns of organizations facing a number of impediments in their operations, including challenges in signing the mandatory memorandums of understanding with the local governments and obtaining recommendation letters for renewal of the NGO permits. The practice of charging illegal fees for registration and provision of services to organizations is also commonplace.

This report further documents a number of impediments on the exercise of the freedom of peaceful assembly. Despite the 1995 Constitution of Uganda providing firm guarantees for the freedom to assemble, protest and to petition peacefully, several incidents of police officers, private security guards, and local government leaders forcefully blocking or dispersing peaceful assemblies were reported. Some of the protestors were subjected to arbitrary arrests.

In the Karamoja sub-region, incidents of allegations of unlawful arrests, torture and prolonged detention of civilians during cordon and search operations were reported. A local human rights monitor working with a civil society organization in the sub-region reported receiving threats for carrying out human rights monitoring and documentation of the violations. A few weeks later, the offices of the civil society organization where he worked was broken-into and vandalized by unknown assailants.

Deplorable conditions in places of detention coupled with detention of suspects beyond the constitutional 48-hour limit are still an impediment to personal liberty rights. Where release of a suspect is within the permissible time frame, allegations of payment for police bond have been made.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS BY DISTRICT

Adjumani District

Adjumani district is located in the Northern Region of Uganda. It is one of the districts that form Uganda's common border with the Republic of South Sudan. It hosts over 220,000 refugees from South Sudan and other parts of the region.¹ The district is also home to Zoka Central Forest Reserve, one of the protected natural forests of Uganda. Environmental human rights defenders who work in the district to combat illegal logging and illicit charcoal trade often face many hurdles and reprisal attacks.

Freedom of Expression, Including Freedom of the Press and Other Media

On the state of the freedom of expression, some human rights defenders and activists who spoke out on critical issues were targeted by the local authorities. The objective was to either muzzle them or subject them to a reprisal attack for their past human rights work.

For example, on August 30, 2023, the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) of the district, Mr. Oryomo Grandfield Omonda, summarily and indefinitely interdicted Mr. Manga Godfrey Ilemiya, an Assistant District Health Officer in charge of Environmental Health, from public service on accusations of issuing 'media statements' on what many, at the time, had termed as shoddy road construction works. After the public outcry, the road construction works improved and better roads were constructed.

These developments caused a high level of self-censorship among human rights defenders and activists in the district. Environmental human rights defenders, in particular, reported having to be extremely cautious in their advocacy work to avoid arbitrary arrests, detentions, torture and other human rights violations. Grassroot monitors and defenders working with Friends of Zoka, a local environmental watchdog operating in the district, often faced intimidation, harassment and threats of arbitrary arrests and detention.

In January 2024, the District Chairperson of Adjumani district is alleged to have warned members of the public to cease complaining about the poor state of road constructions in the district or face dire consequences.

Findings further revealed concerns with the media ownership landscape in the district, particularly in as far as it related to editorial independence and other aspects of press freedom. The majority

¹ UNHCR, <https://data.unhcr.org/fr/country/uga>

of media houses are owned by local politicians who are members of the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) party. It was reported that they interfered on editorial independence of the media houses. This limited space for alternative and dissenting viewpoints.

Freedom of Association

The working environment of civil society organisations varies depending on their mandates. Organizations that work on matters relating to natural resources, governance, accountability and human rights found difficulties to operate in the district. The organisations that work in other areas, for instance, health and education, do not experience these concerns.

Human rights defenders in the district reported experiencing challenges signing memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with local government authorities, which is prerequisite in securing registration or renewing operation permits as non-governmental organisations. The local government leaders often demanded for illegal fees in order to consider applications for MOUs and other support services to the civil society sector.

Civil society actors working with community-based organisations (CBOs) in the district reported receiving demands to pay statutory fees directly to the responsible local government leaders, instead of making payments to the Uganda Revenue Authority (URA) accounts as provided for under the law. This exposed the organisations to claims of obtaining operation permits without payment of the prescribed fees. Human rights defenders working with CBOs in the district further expressed concern with the overly restrictive jurisdiction for CBOs of subcounty/division instead of the previous operation area of a district.

Human rights defenders experience threats of arrests and other forms of intimidation, judicial harassment, blackmail, social exclusion, and they were excluded from accessing funding opportunities because local government authorities were not willing to recommend them. This is an affront to the right of these organisations to favourably compete and access resources.

Respect for the Integrity of the Person

Inmates in Adjumani district were routinely subjected to hard labour for over eight hours on private projects of prison officials, local politicians and business people. The common projects include working on cash crop farms such as cotton farms, construction works, brick laying, and other labour-intensive projects. The prison authorities were responsible for hiring out the inmates instead of making the prison a correctional facility. During the rainy seasons, it was clear that the

lucrative farm owners in the district relied on the prisoners to work on their farms under harrowing conditions, and for meagre pay. Pre-trial detainees were also sent out to work on the farms.

Arua City / District

Arua District lies in the West Nile Sub-region of the Northern Region of Uganda. It is bordered by the Democratic Republic of Congo and it is at the confluence of a trade route between Uganda, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is therefore a hub of trade activities.

Freedom of Expression, Including Freedom of the Press and Other Media

The working environment for journalists and media workers is generally fair. However, there were tensions between journalists and state agencies relating to access to information. Requests for information that may expose acts of corruption were routinely denied. Journalists also considered the processes for accessing information in the hands of the state as bureaucratic and thus not considered helpful in their quest to obtain information. There was also a general lack of knowledge of the law that provides for the right of access to information and the procedure of filing the requests.

Freedom of Association

There were collaborative efforts between civil society organisations (non-governmental organisations and community-based organisations) and the local government authorities in civic education, service delivery and research activities. These research activities were approved and closely monitored by the local government authorities.

The relationship between civil society and local government authorities was generally cordial. The organisations faced numerous challenges in their work with the District NGO Monitoring Committee (DMNC) due to demands for payment of illegal fees to access the services to be provided by the Committee. It was also noted that the Committee, as is the case in many other districts, was not funded by the state to effectively play its role.

The freedom of association of organisations working on human rights and accountability in the district were also targeted through negative rhetoric that are made by local leaders. For instance, the organisations were often accused of being agents of foreign interests and funders of opposition political activities. Journalists also reported facing challenges in accessing information on contracts with service providers and budgeting from the local government authorities.

Respect for the Integrity of the Person

The conditions of detention facilities were described as deplorable. Prisons and police cells were overcrowded and have poor hygiene standards. The detainees were not provided with regular meals and they are often tortured. A former detainee at Arua Government Prison recounted to our researcher as follows: *“You have to sleep on your ribs just to create some space. Late in the night, our leader would wake up people to turn to another side and everyone has to turn. I do not pray to go back to the prison.”*

There were reported incidents of mistreatment and beatings by both suspects and police officers in police detention facilities. It is also claimed that leaders of inmates in prison (*Katikiros*) commonly abused and assaulted their fellow inmates.

The problem of detention beyond the forty-eight hours as legally mandated remained persistent at many police stations. Suspects are held for long periods, illegally, as the police scramble to assemble evidence that can sustain production in court. This problem is caused by the police practice of arresting people arbitrarily, and then investigating later.

Gulu City / District

Gulu District is located in Acholi Sub-Region, Northern Region of Uganda. The district is among the areas of the country that had been most affected since the beginning of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) conflict in 1987. Gulu has been a focus of post-conflict reconstruction activities, including transitional justice initiatives. There is a rapidly growing business community in the district and emerging environmental and human rights concerns arising from resettlement and commercial activities.

Freedom of Expression, Including Freedom of the Press and Other Media

Journalists face challenges to accessing information in the hands of local government authorities and State agencies in the district. Requests for information are directed to the office of the Resident District Commissioner (RDC) and division security forces commanders who commonly turn them down, citing the sensitive nature of the information sought. This is in conflict with the procedures laid down under the Access to Information Act, 2005 (AIA).

It was also observed that many journalists did not have a good understanding of the procedures for requesting information under the AIA. The Uganda Police Force Annual Crime Report, 2023,²

² Ibid.

notes that from January to December 2023, only two media offences were reported to the police in the district.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

Protest rights of people in the district came under the spotlight during the review period. On March 24, 2024, environmental activists demonstrated against the building of a petrol station in a wetland in Pece. The protesters claimed that the developer had ignored the letters sent to him by city leaders, expressing concerns about the environmental and social impact of the development. While the police did not use force to disperse the peaceful protestors, they stood by and watched the private security guards, deployed by the developer, violently disperse the peaceful protestors. The police did not fulfil its obligation of protecting protestors to ensure that they were able to exercise their freedoms unhindered. Such actions contribute to the chilling effect which encourages self-censorship in exercise of freedoms.

Respect for the Integrity of the Person

The research revealed a violation of integrity of the person, especially of children living on the streets and homeless persons. Under the leadership of the Deputy Resident City Commissioner (DRCC) in-charge of Laroo-Pece division, the local law enforcement officers conducted search and cordon operations aimed at indiscriminately arresting the children and homeless people. The people arrested were arbitrarily charged with various offences.

They were also subjected to dehumanising screening exercises, and some children were detained with adults. Money was also extorted from the detainees for their release, and in most cases, they were held for more than forty-eight hours in police cells, contrary to the law.

There were no telephone facilities at the police stations in the district. This made it difficult for suspects to inform their relatives or friends or lawyers about the arrests. This was in violation of the right of detainees. This situation is further compounded by the fact that most of the arrested people do not have a fixed place of abode, and sureties, which are some of the requirements for being released on bond.

Victims of 'political arrests' spent long periods in police custody, particularly where such individuals were perceived to, or actually belonged to an opposition political party. Suspects arrested in the period before the weekend or on public holidays spent more than the prescribed period of forty-eight hours in police detention. There were reported cases of the police extracting

forced confessions from vulnerable suspects, especially those who had limited knowledge of their rights. In the words of one of the respondents:

“Some suspects in Gulu are forced to record statements based on what police say or to accept the allegations imposed on them and failure to do so, they are assaulted or tortured. This happens when police are bribed by the complainant or have vested interest in the case.”

Acts of torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment were rampant in police detention facilities in the district. However, the level of ill-treatment meted out, depends on the nature of the crime a person was suspected to have committed. For instance, persons arrested for political offences were at risk of torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment.

Hoima District

Hoima District is located in the Albertine Graben area of Western Uganda. This district is faced with unique human rights challenges, mainly arising from the ongoing oil extraction activities. The other most notable activity is the East African Crude Oil Project (EACOP), a development project for a 1,443 kilometers-heated, insulated, and buried crude oil export pipeline starting at Kabaale, in Hoima district, and ending at a Marine Storage Terminal and Load Out Facility at Chongoleani, Tanga district in Tanzania, linking the Albertine Graben to the international oil market.³ This pipeline is designed to transport two hundred sixteen thousand barrels of crude oil per day.⁴

Freedom of Expression, Including Freedom of the Press and Other Media

There was fear among human rights defenders, including journalists, of the consequences of expressing views and reporting on human rights and accountability issues – especially around the oil extractive industry. Most of the respondents interacted with expressed concerns of living under a state of self-censorship arising from past reprisal attacks and harassment of vocal defenders and journalists.

A few journalists and civil society actors reported being dissuaded by reporting on human rights issues that affect communities and project affected persons, by business persons and politicians. A journalist with an online media house stated that: *“Some people tend to appear politely advising*

³ Petroleum Authority of Uganda, online [The East African Crude Oil Pipeline \(EACOP\) Project – Petroleum Authority of Uganda \(PAU\)](#). (accessed 13.04.2024).

⁴ Ibid.

me to drop some sensitive stories as they regard them to be of less importance yet problematic. Some promise to facilitate information in their interests.”

Freedom of Association

The work of civil society organisations in the district was affected by limited access to resources due to the closure of the Democratic Governance Facility (DGF). This lack of financial resources has adversely impacted their ability to execute their mandates. Many organisations have significantly scaled down their operations, and others have completely closed down.

The research observed instances where civil society groups that attempted to start their operations faced challenges of completing the registration process, especially during the registration process at the NGO Bureau. Community Development Officers (CDOs) were named in alleged reports of extorting money from individuals who wished to start up organisations. A few reports of illegal fees being asked by local government officials during efforts to sign memorandum of understandings (MOUs) between the organisations and the district as required by the law were documented. Persons who were unable or unwilling to pay the illegal fees or bribes failed or experienced inordinate delays in signing the MOUs with the local government and accessing other related services.

Relationships between the civil society organisations and local government authorities were strained by what was conceived by former as overzealous regulation by the latter. During the reporting period, local communities and the organisations carried out advocacy campaigns to demand for prior and adequate compensation for project affected persons. As a result, the #StopEACOP campaign and Tilenga compensation campaign caused tensions between civil society and the local government authorities.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

Protest rights in the district came under attack during the reporting period. For example, in February 2024, the police dispersed a peaceful demonstration organized by residents who were protesting the actions of the government of replacing Bulera Primary Teachers’ College with Bunyoro University. The police officers claimed that the demonstration was illegal and vowed to prosecute all the people that participated in it.

In March 2024, residents of Kibati and Mpaija protested against the poor conditions of the roads in these areas. The police forcefully dispersed peaceful demonstrators. They claimed that the demonstrators were disrupting public order, posing a security threat to the business community

and the entire district. Authorities renovated the roads, following the protests. Once arrested, protestors were commonly charged with inciting violence under the Penal Code Act. The Uganda police Force routinely condemned organisers and participants of such peaceful demonstrations.

Respect for the Integrity of the Person

Individuals who were arrested on suspicion of committing crimes were routinely detained at police stations for days, in disregard of prescribed limit of forty-eight hours.

Some suspects were held incommunicado by law enforcement authorities. For example, the suspects arrested in relation to the Rwobunyonyi land conflict in August 2023 were held in an unknown location for several hours.

Kampala City / District

Kampala District hosts the capital city of Uganda. Kampala has a rapidly growing population, with a population of 1,875,834 residents and 627,340 visitors during the day.⁵

Freedom of Expression, Including Freedom of the Press and Other Media

Critics of corruption, bad governance and human rights violations faced challenges of expressing themselves freely. There was an emerging trend of activists using social media platforms to expose, poor service delivery, human rights violations and misuse of public of public office. This trend has garnered more support from the public than the conventional ways of monitoring, documenting and reporting public concerns. However, the activists were threatened by public officials.

Between February and March 2024, Makerere University academic, Dr. Jimmy Spire Ssentongo and Ugandan lawyer and freelance journalist Agather Atuhaire started an online campaign using X (formerly Twitter) to expose rampant corruption in the Parliament of Uganda. They were threatened and vilified by public officials in Parliament and other arms of government. Despite having generated public debate on the state of governance in the country, they were labelled with derogatory terms and accused of targeting proponents of the Anti-Homosexuality Act, 2023 (AHA).

Several incidents of harassment and arbitrary arrests of journalists who exposed human rights violations and abuse of office were documented. For instance, on 5 October 2023, seventeen journalists from media houses were arrested by State security personnel while covering the return

⁵ UBOS, Census 2024, <https://www.ubos.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/National-Population-and-Housing-Census-2024-Dissemination-of-Preliminary-Results.pdf>

of the National Unity Platform (NUP) leader, Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, to the country. During the incident, several journalists were beaten and their equipment, including phones and cameras, were confiscated by state security operatives at Katabi and Mpererwe, Entebbe. These journalists were detained at Entebbe police station for several hours and released. No one was charged.

Freedom of Association

Civil society organisations, particularly those that worked on critical human rights issues, reported incidents of surveillance and scrutiny by state agencies. Many organisations operated in a state of tension for fear of adverse government actions.

Reports of facing impediments in exercising the freedom of association as a result of stringent and laborious registration procedures were documented. Those that successfully registered reported facing significant challenges in signing MOUs with the local government. The process often required paying illegal fees, bribes and took between 4 to 6 months to be completed. The District Internal Security Officers (DISOs) were reported to have a veto power to block signing MOUs due to the excessive significance placed on security issues despite the power being placed in the hands of the District NGO Monitoring Committee, where the DISO is just a single member.

Many organisations that worked with sexual minorities failed to register with the authorities because they were considered to be illegal entities.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

There were no reports of major incidents relating to restrictions of the enjoyment of the right to peaceful assembly during the reporting period. However, relating to restrictions on the right to peaceful assembly, many people did not seek to exercise this freedom because of self-censorship and fear of a violent crackdown by the government. In the past, peaceful protests and demonstrations had been violently blocked resulting in hundreds of casualties, extrajudicial killings, and arbitrary arrests. Previous incidents show that this freedom often comes under attack during active political periods or when citizens raise to express critical views or demanded to hold government officials to account.

Situated in Western Uganda, Kasese District is bordered by the Democratic Republic of Congo to the East. This district has experienced a number of natural disasters, the most recent being the deadly landslides of September 2022. Kasese has also experienced cultural and ethnic conflicts, as well as political clashes that have exposed the people to various human rights violations. In November 2016, the cultural leader of Rwenzururu Kingdom, Mumbere Irimangoma was brutally arrested and charged with treason-related offences. More than 100 people were killed and many suffered debilitating injuries, during the military raid on cultural leader's palace by Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF). While over 200 royal guards and other people were arrested alongside the King in the palace, no law enforcement security personnel or government official has been held accountable for the excesses of the security forces during the assault on the palace.

Freedom of Expression, Including Freedom of the Press and Other Media

Uganda Police Annual Crime Report, 2023,⁶ states that between January and December 2023, only one media offence was reported to the police in Kasese. This district is under a siege of self-censorship, following the November 2016 events. These events have adversely affected the work of journalists. Journalists as well as other members of the general community cannot freely express their concerns on issues that affect the governance of the district. Persons who publicly expresses critical views risk being arrested and detained on trumped-up charges.

There was a fairly good relationship between state institutions and journalists in the district. Because of the limited political activities and self-censorship, there were no reported incidents of state institution clashes with journalists. Engagements between the two groups made it easier to access and exchange information. However, journalists conducting investigations on corruption work under fear. Those that have exposed incidents of corruption in poverty alleviation programs, for instance, the Parish Development Model (PDM), or the Presidential Initiative on Wealth and Job Creation (Emyooga), were targeted by local government officials on baseless allegations of being against government programs.

Media workers were poorly paid, and in some cases, they were not paid at all. It was also common for media workers to be arbitrarily dismissed from work. On January 2, 2024, a female journalist was allegedly unfairly dismissed from a local FM station. On March 27, 2024, another journalist was unfairly dismissed from another local radio station where he had worked for more than five years without pay or a contract. Many journalists do not have formal contracts of employment with

⁶ Uganda Police Annual Crime Report, 2023.

the media houses, and as such, they work under unfavourable terms and conditions. Journalists who produced reports that are critical of government programs were more likely to be dismissed.

Freedom of Association

Civil society organisations that work on human rights issues were under heavy surveillance by state security personnel, including Gombolola Internal Security Officers (GISOs), Parish Internal Security Officers (PISOs), UPF and LGAs such as CDOs. Organisations that attempted to engage in civic empowerment of the community, risked being forced to close, while those that worked on minority rights, were been labelled “agents of western imperialism” by some local government officials.

Organisations that worked on sexual minority rights were at higher risk of being singled out for harassment. Tensions further escalated when the Constitutional Court largely upheld the Anti-Homosexuality Act, 2023. An employee of a civil society organisation shared his experience:

“One day in November 2023, I was bypassing the DISO’s office and one of the staff called me saying we hear you support LGBTIQ and that they are giving you money to do your human rights and advocacy work. I didn’t exactly understand the motive behind his statement. Although I was worried to hear such words given that my organisation had just finished implementing a project that established Rapid Response Fund for CBOs working with LGBTIQ rights”⁷

Kisoro District

Kisoro District is located in Kigezi Sub-Region, in the extreme South-Western Region of Uganda. It shares a boundary with the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Republic of Rwanda. It hosts many refugees, mainly from the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo, who easily cross into Uganda through Bunagana border post. There are reports of minor security concerns related to the cross-border trade between Ugandans and Congolese. The district also hosts the Kyanika border post that connects Uganda to the Republic of Rwanda.

Freedom of Expression, Including Freedom of the Press and Other Media

There was a relatively conducive working environment for journalists in the district. Journalists had no major challenge in access in to information held by the state. However, journalists were denied information on government activities, which authorities deemed sensitive.

⁷ Quote from an interview with a human rights defender working on sexual minority rights in the district. Name withheld on request.

Freedom of Association

There were a few reported incidents of threats made to HRDs who work on accountability and service delivery. Civil society organisations operating in the district did not report facing local challenges. However, several reported challenges with accessing services provided by regulators based in Kampala such as the National Bureau for NGOs and the Financial Intelligence Authority.

Kitgum District

Kitgum District is located in Acholi Sub-Region in Northern Region. It is bordered by the Republic of Southern Sudan to the north.

Freedom of Expression, including Freedom of the Press and Other Media

Human rights defenders operating in the district reported incidents of intimidation, harassment and arbitrary arrests of journalists. Some journalists were forced to leave the district in fear of reprisals following repeated acts intimidation from state security agents, politicians and LGAs.

In December 2023, a journalist working with Mighty Fire FM was attacked and threatened by staff of the RDC's office. In another incident, a former employee of the same media house and four youths were arrested on the instructions of the RDC. The two people arrested were later released. This wave of arrests has created fear among journalists and an environment of self-censorship. Following such acts of harassment and intimidation, management of the radio stations often deny the media workers access to their favourite programs in an effort to avoid exposing the station to further risks of adverse action.

Respect for the Integrity of the Person

There were several reported cases of unlawful arrests carried out by community leaders and state security agencies. Arrested persons were routinely subjected to torture or to other forms of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. In December 2023, a resident of Lagot village, Larakaraka parish, Mucwini East Sub-County was arrested by the Local Council III Chairperson and tortured by five men. Some of the perpetrators were dressed in UPDF uniforms. To date, these alleged perpetrators have not been brought to account for their actions.

Fair Trial and Due Process Rights

While many persons in conflict with the law wait for long periods for their trials to be concluded, there were improvements in adhering to the maximum forty-eight-hour detention rule at police stations. However, it was claimed that the majority of suspects released on police bond, before expiry of the forty-eight-hour rule, paid bribes to the police. Persons arrested on politically motivated charges spent longer periods in police custody.

There were delays in sanctioning files by the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (ODPP) in the district. This contributed to violation of the forty-eight-hour detention rule and overcrowding in police cells. Families and friends of arrested persons were often asked to pay ‘production fees’ to facilitate transportation of the suspects for trial, if they wanted the cases to be resolved quickly.

Kotido District

Kotido District is situated in Karamoja Sub-Region in the Northern Region of Uganda. This district has experienced insecurity and human rights concerns as a result of recurring cattle rustling, inter-tribal violence, and the disarmament programme.

Freedom of Expression, including Freedom of the Press and Other Media

HRDs, including journalists, were harassed by state security agencies and other groups in the community in an effort to silence them from reporting on human rights, corruption and accountability issues. An investigative journalist working in the district reported having been threatened several times since September 2023 because of a story that implicated a UPDF officer in the killing of three civilians.

Karamoja Rights Advocates Network (KRANET), a local civil society organisation, took up the matter and worked with the UHRC among other State institutions to pursue and apprehend the suspect. This UPDF officer was sentenced to sixty-five years in prison. The journalist has retreated from doing any further media work for fear of his safety.

During the reporting period, three other journalists reported acts of harassment including confiscation and destruction of their equipment as well as detention in UPDF detention facilities. Following interventions by the UHRC, the journalists were released. This environment characterized by intimidation, unlawful arrest and arbitrary detention created a sense of fear and panic as well as self-censorship in the journalist community.

Freedom of Association

There were reported incidents of office break-ins in the offices of civil society organisations that worked on human rights, as well as physical and verbal attacks and intimidation of their staff. These acts were attributed to attempts by local government officials and state security agencies to stifle voices and intimidate civil society groups in the region.

Respect for the Integrity of the Person

There were reports of several unlawful arrests and detention of innocent civilians by UPDF officers, during the cordon and search exercise. Cordon and search is the common approach used by the UPDF to implementing the disarmament programme in the sub-region. Persons detained are often tortured, held for long periods in military detention facilities, and some are subjected to military law. This is illegal because in 2021, the Constitutional Court of Uganda ruled that trial of civilians in the General Court Martial was unconstitutional.

During the reporting period, over sixty-five suspects of cattle rustling and persons accused of possessing fire arms illegally, were arrested and tortured by UPDF soldiers in Nakapelemoru village, and after taken to Moroto prison, before they appeared before a court law. Detention without trial, in military facilities and prisons, is a common practice in this district.

While in detention, individuals were tortured to extract confessions and money for their release. Reports of extrajudicial killings during the disarmament programme were reported. Attempts by civil society organizations to carry out human rights monitoring and documentation in the sub-region were impeded through use of threats.

Kween District

Kween district is located in Sebei Sub-Region, Eastern Uganda. It is bordered by the Republic of Kenya to the south. This district has also experienced incidents of cattle rustling and female genital mutilation.

Freedom of Expression, Including Freedom of the Press and Other Media

The general environment was conducive for the right to freedom to expression. Members of the public voiced their opinions, shared ideas, and expressed their creativity without hindrances. Journalists operated in a generally free environment. However, journalists that reported on land

conflicts received threats from private individuals who had an interest in the matter and in some incidents, threats from government officials.

Freedom of Association

The working environment of civil society organisations in the district was generally favourable, save for challenges relating to signing MOUs with the local government. The organisations were often frustrated with the process which they claim was too bureaucratic and often involved payment of illegal fees to access service. The responsible local government leaders did not have a clear understanding of the current law regulating the civil society sector. Civil society also did not have sufficient knowledge of the law.

Mbale City / District

Mbale District is located in Bugisu Sub-Region in Eastern Uganda.

Freedom of Association

Following the closure of DGF in 2022, many CSOs in Mbale are struggling to maintain their operations due to lack of funding. Some organizations have closed. The void in funding has negatively affected human rights advocacy in the district.

On a positive note, the relationship between CSOs, LGAs and state security agencies, for instance UPF, and offices of the DISO and RDC was described as cordial. These groups have developed platforms for regular engagements. However, the cordial relations are punctuated by periods of disengagement, often resulting from top government officials criticizing CSOs.

CSOs, particularly those that work on issues that are perceived as not political or controversial, did not experience major difficulties in signing MOUs with the local government. The organizations that worked on sensitive issues as sex workers and sexual minorities faced significant hurdles and threats in their operations.

Moroto District

Moroto District is situated in Karamoja Sub-Region in Mid-North Eastern Uganda. It shares its entire eastern borderline with the Republic of Kenya. This district has experienced attacks from other Karamojong tribal groups commonly known as 'Karamojong Warriors'. It is also the focus of the disarmament programme by the UPDF, as well as government poverty alleviation programmes.

Freedom of Expression, Including Freedom of the Press and Other Media

Local government authorities regularly invited journalists to attend government programs. However, they often declined to provide information relating to awarding of contracts such as for road and bore hole constructions. Requests for such information were silenced with threats and harassments.

The disarmament exercise was also a flashpoint between the local community and the authorities. Journalists and CSOs that reported on the human rights implications of the cordon and search operations by the UPDF were threatened, attacked and some were arbitrarily arrested. As a result, there was an atmosphere of self-censorship among human rights defenders.

Freedom of Association

CSOs working in the areas of gender empowerment, economic, and social cultural rights did not face any challenges in their registration and operations. However, organisations working on minerals and extractives sector, human rights, and accountability reported facing threats from multinational corporations working in the district and the local government authorities. The organisations faced challenges in securing MOUs with the district. They were generally considered saboteurs of government programs, and were often blamed for engaging in partisan politics.

Respect for the Integrity of the Person

The disarmament programme involved cordon and search operations during which state security agencies supported by local leaders carried out indiscriminate arrests and detention of persons perceived to be Karamojong Warriors. Many youths, in particular boys, between the age of eighteen and twenty-eight were rounded up and arrested. Several reports of disappearances and incommunicado detention were also documented. The cordon and search operation has also been used by some political opponents to settle rivalries. Several local politicians have been detained, tortured and subjected to military law on false accusations.

Fair Trial and Due Process Rights

Cordon and search exercises were usually conducted at night or during early mornings and without search warrants. State security agencies used excessive force including lethal force, which sometimes resulted into deaths of innocent people. Suspects were detained in military barracks, which are not authorised places of detention under the law, for long periods and in harsh

conditions. They were interrogated using crude methods that allegedly amounted to torture to force confessions. Some of the civilians arrested were then illegally tried in military courts.

Otuke District

Otuke District is located in Northern Uganda, in the 'northern cattle corridor'. It has experienced attacks by Karamojong cattle rustlers. Service delivery is described as poor.

Freedom of Expression, Including Freedom of the Press and Other Media

The general environment allows for free flow of information in as far as residents are well informed about government programs. This has been facilitated by regular engagements between LGAs and residents, mainly through radio talk shows and community outreaches. This notwithstanding, attempts by the media and civil society to expose incidents of misuse of public funds, poor service delivery and corruption by LGAs were not tolerated by authorities. According to a civil society employee:

“What actually causes the fear is inferiority complex, they say they fear falling in trouble after whatever they reveal. There are corruption tendencies that cannot be talked about. For instance, government releases funds for community sensitisation but nothing is done and just few people benefit from the said services like immunisations, Vaccinations, Mosquito Net Distributions among others. No one can demand for accountabilities on issues poor road networks in the district”.

Incidents of some journalists being arbitrarily arrested while doing their work were also reported. In some cases, UPF officers confiscated equipment of journalists. For example, on October 9, 2023, a police officer confiscated the equipment of a team of journalists from G FM while they were covering the arrest of suspects. The journalists' equipment was returned to them and they were cautioned to desist from interfering with police investigations in such sensitive matters.

Media workers were threatened by some members of District Security Committee chaired by the RDC. Some radio stations were regularly bullied into allowing free radio airtime to government officials and prominent political actors. In November 2023, when the management of one of the radio stations demanded for payment from the local government authorities for a radio talk show, they were threatened with closure.

Freedom of Association

Organisations that express interests in opening field offices in the district were frustrated by protracted registration and approval procedures at the district level. For example, an organisation that sought to extend its services to the district to work on economic empowerment was obstructed from getting clearance to open up an office by some local government actors. of resident of the district.

Respect for the Integrity of the Person

Suspects who are arrested in the district are often held in deplorable conditions where they are subjected to ill-treatment. Conditions in most police cells in the district are deplorable. Suspects are held in environments of poor hygiene and there were no arrangements for meals unless they are provided by the next-of-kin of the suspect.

Fair Trial and Due Process Rights

Detention at police stations, in the majority of cases exceed the forty-eight hours prescribed by the law. Suspects often paid bribes to secure police bond, which is free under the law. The administration of criminal justice was further clogged by many factors including delays in sanctioning files for trial, arbitrary arrests, and spurious charges.

The magistrates' courts in the district do not hear cases at regular intervals. When the courts sat, sometimes twice a week, there were overwhelmed by the number of accused to be tried. The plight of this suspects is further compounded by Otuke magisterial area also serving Alebtong district. It was common for suspects to be brought to court, only to be taken back to remand, without their cases being heard. Whereas efforts have been made by the Judiciary to establish more courts across the country, Otuke had a shortage of court staff.

Wakiso District

Located in the Central Region of Uganda, Wakiso District partly encircles Kampala, the capital city. This district forms part of the Kampala metropolitan area. Wakiso has an approximate population of slightly above two-million people.⁸ In 2019, Wakiso established the first local government human rights committee, the Wakiso District Human Rights Committee (WDHRC), with the mandate to enhance the promotion and protection of human rights in the district. The active

⁸ See https://www.citypopulation.de/en/uganda/central/admin/052_wakiso/ (accessed 27th March 2024)

political activities in Wakiso and its geographical location, near the country's capital city, make it vulnerable to serious human rights violations.

Freedom of Expression, Including Freedom of the Press and Other Media

Journalists routinely reported on human rights issues in the district. The reports covered incidents of arbitrary arrests, torture, incommunicado detention, the attack on civil society organizations, among others. These reports exposed the journalists to threats and other risks. As a result, the journalists operated in fear of reprisal attacks. Incidents of harassment, doxing, and cyberviolence against women were also documented online were also documented.

Freedom of Association

CSOs work in a generally restrictive environment. As a district with probably the highest concentration of organizations in the country, the impact of this freedom was more pronounced in the assessment. CSOs reported facing challenges such as complex NGO registration processes and protracted processes in securing recommendation letters for registration and renewal.

Organisations were often further required to pay illegal fees to facilitate signing of MOUs with the local government. To expediate the registration process and the signing of MOUs, CSOs often paid illegal fees in the region of five-hundred thousand shillings.

The enactment of the Anti-Homosexuality Act 2023, followed by its recent confirmation by the Constitutional Court further present a state of fear among CSOs that provide services such as healthcare to minority groups, including the LGBTIQ+ and sex workers. Many organizations were forced to work remotely for fear of reprisal attacks and other adverse government actions.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

There were reports of state security agencies profiling individuals and blocking peaceful assemblies by groups that expressed views which were contrary to those of persons who wield political or financial power. For example, in January 2024, the police arbitrarily arrested and detained several protestors in Busabuli, in Mende-Wakiso district for participating in a peaceful demonstration against stone quarrying activities in their areas. The police ordered the protestors to disperse on grounds that the police had not given the organizers permission to demonstrate. This approach of clamping down on protest rights because of the nature of speech involved is common in Uganda.