

Human rights activist calls for respect for human rights for all despite COVID-19



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discrimination. Dr Adrian Jjuuko, the executive director, at Human Rights Awareness Promotion Forum, (HRAPF), says the status of human rights in Uganda has generally improved since independence, though the current political acts are overshadowing the gains.

He says the 1995 Constitution protects human rights for everyone hence government should work on how to handle political activists and the forthcoming general elections without infringing on people's rights.

"In terms of enforcement, we have come a long way, violations are rising especially during the election period. Elections are becoming violent and innocent lives are being lost. Currently, we are working on cases of people who were tortured and marginalised yet they ought to be protected, especially women. Other cases

are for the people who were arrested during the lockdown Dr. Jjuuko says.

Many people, according to Dr. Jjuuko, are being tortured while others sustain permanent disabilities as a result of being manhandled by the security personnel.

Impact of Covid-19

Covid- 19 has brought more challenges especially with the limitations in movement and access to justice by human rights victims.

Dr. Jjuuko says during the lockdown, some courts were closed to the general public

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"We continue to advocate and engage the relevant authorities about human rights because it is fundamental to all of us," he adds.

which affected people that had cases to be attended to.

"True the pandemic is with us but to a certain extent it is being used as an excuse by some politicians as we have seen that some government officials are violating the Covid-19 Standard Operating Procedures especially during these campaigns. The rules are being applied selectively," Dr. Jjuuko says.

He says there are worries that Covid-19 will be used as an excuse yet people's rights are being violated. "For example, during the recent riots following the arrest of presidential candidate Robert Kyagulanyi, to disperse the rioters who were protesting against his arrest, it is said that Police used excessive force leading to the loss of lives of innocent citizens.

It is alleged that Police used live bullets to disperse the rioting crowds. In response, to my surprise, the Police said they

were enforcing Covid-19 directives and one asks how bullets are related to controlling the spread of the pandemic," Dr. Jjuuko asks.

He says as HRAPF, they can only engage government and also going to courts of law to fight for those people whose rights are abused, including the tortured ones. "We continue to advocate and engage the relevant authorities about human rights because it is fundamental to all of us," he adds.

Relevancy of the theme

Dr. Jjuuko says as per this year's theme, Ugandans and human rights activists should stand up and fight against cases of human rights abuse.

"We have laws condemning human rights abuses but to uphold and protect human rights that must come from us as citizens," he says.



THE NEED TO PROTECT THE MOST VULNERABLE AND MOST MARGINALISED DURING THE COVID-19 RECOVERY PROCESS

Commemoration of International Human Rights day, 2020

Today marks 72 years since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was promulgated, and this calls for celebration as this important document has continued to inspire the movement to protect and defend human rights globally since then. This celebration comes amidst the COVID-19 pandemic which has changed life as we knew it before – with imposed lockdowns, the need for social distancing and the need to cover our faces with masks, let alone the huge cost in human lives, and the negative impact on health systems and the economy.

For marginalised and vulnerable persons, they have been hit the most by the economic meltdown, and also bear the biggest vulnerability to contracting COVID-19. Groups such as sexual minorities, sex workers, drug users, petty traders and the

unemployed also faced the worst impact of the restrictions on travel and closure of work places, since many have to work day to day just to get what to eat. As they struggled to get what to eat amidst inadequate food relief by the state, many had to endure violence meted out by state agencies who were enforcing the travel restrictions.

On 29th March 2020, a group of 20 youths were arrested from a homeless persons, shelter in Kyengera Town Council. They were charged with 'doing a negligent act likely to spread infection of disease' and remanded to Kitalya Prison, where they remained in detention for more than 40 days without being allowed access to their lawyers.

They were subjected to beatings, abuses and insults and in one

extreme case, one of them was burnt between the thighs with a burning log of wood by a prisons officer. This is just one example of such violations meted out against the poor and marginalised. Many persons living with HIV could not access treatment as there was no way of accessing the health facilities and worse still, many did not have food, which they needed for their medication to be effective.

The theme for this year is 'Recover better: Stand up for Human Rights.' As we recover from COVID-19, we have to reflect on what we can do better, to make the situation better for everyone, especially for those most vulnerable and most marginalised. In order to have inclusivity and equality in the recovery process, human rights

must be at the center. Human Rights Awareness and Promotion Forum calls upon the Government of Uganda to adopt a human rights based approach in its COVID-19 recovery plans and take concrete steps in ensuring an equal society for all. All persons regardless of who they are need to be respected and valued.

The UDHR recognises protection of the most marginalised among us, and this should be at the forefront of the COVID-19 recovery process. We also call upon citizens to stand up for their rights – to demand and to speak out against excesses. It is only when citizens actively demand for their rights that human rights became a reality for them.

Taking human rights to all