

Govt admits human rights violation

KAMPALA. Government has conceded to widespread human rights violations against citizens by security forces.

The admission comes amid strong condemnation from various human rights actors both nationally and globally.

Several human rights reports have painted grim pictures of Uganda, with the police and other security agencies being singled out as the worst culprits of brutality often meted out against the citizens.

During a public dialogue on human rights situation held on Friday, different actors hit out at the violation of human rights and called on the government to stop the atrocities.

Mr Meddie Kagwa, the chairperson of the Uganda Human Rights Commission (UHRC), set the tone of the dialogue when he listed a litany of recent human rights violations by the security and other state agencies.

But in a rare admission of guilt, the executive director of Uganda Media Centre, Mr Ofwono Opondo, admitted there have been rampant cases of tortures and violations of human rights by the security forces and other state actors.

"The Government of Uganda doesn't deny that there are abuses by security agencies, there are many," he said.

He added that the government is working hard to ensure that such abuses do not continue.

Mr Opondo said in the past govern-

ment has punished those who have violated peoples' rights.

"I think that should send signals to everyone that officially, government institutions do not tolerate human rights violations," he said.

Mr Kagwa had said over the years, government has been getting increasingly intolerant to divergent views. He cited the ongoing debate on proposed constitutional amendment of presidential age limit as one of the infringements on the rights of citizens.

He said those opposed to the amendment have been brutally arrested and beaten and not allowed to express their views.

Mr Kagwa also pointed to the closure of some NGO offices, rearrest of the Kaweesi murder suspects and continuing to hold them in detention beyond the mandatory days allowed.

He also said the closure of the Red Pepper newspaper and charging their directors in courts of law is a clear testimony that the government has reneged on its duty to protect and respect the rights of the masses.

Danish ambassador Morgens Pedersen, who spoke on behalf of the European Union, said: "We are concerned about the latest political developments in Uganda, which have depicted shrinking political space and increasing tension in many parts of the country, due to the proposed constitutional amendments."

"There is increasing intolerance for divergent views among members of the public while discussing constitutional reforms in a non-comprehensive and non-consultative manner. This situation has resulted in violent clashes between the police and the public leading to human rights violations and use of excessive force by the police," he said.

Mr Pedersen also said there are also reports of dubious detention of persons who are exercising their freedom of expression, movement, assembly and association.

"This is worsened by severe restrictions on the right to access information such as the disruption of local media from broadcasting/airing public events that are important to the citizens," Mr Pedersen said.

Mr Mwambusya Ndebese, a lecturer of history at Makerere University, implored the government to do more to

protect human rights.

He said Uganda is good at making laws and setting up institutions which remain on papers, but their implementations are lacking.

Prof Ndebese said the long history of authoritarian governance that Uganda inherited from colonial masters has continued to date. He cited laws relating to charges over annoying the person of the president, the Public Order Management Act, the Anti-Terrorism Act, among others which he said the State uses to violate the rights of the citizens.

Several other speakers did not have kind words for the government on such continued violations of the human rights and rule of law.

Mr Opondo again conceded that the force used by the police was unnecessary and uncalled for. He said when two people are sorting out themselves politically; there is no need for security forces and police to intervene on one side against the other.

"Some of the fracas we have witnessed, especially between the police and a small segment of Opposition has been uncalled for. They were essentially civil political contests which police should have left to the NRM party to deal with," he said.

He added that the government would address such issues to ensure there is harmony between the different contesting groups and interests.

Press freedom

Over the years, Uganda has been degenerating in the human rights indices with the latest being the Committee to Protect Journalists listing Uganda among the worst places for journalists to operate in. This year, the country registered seven cases of journalists being arrested and imprisoned.