

Trauma and terror of Kenya's kidnapped protesters

AFP- The Kenyan parliament was ablaze, protesters running through the streets, police firing into the crowds. Among them was John, who believed the unrest could bring about meaningful political change.

But it would be John's last time protesting.

Days later, he was seized by two men in the city's Kibera slum and bundled into an unmarked Subaru car. They pulled a cloth sack over his head and drove him out to a forest. Their guns and handcuffs left him in no doubt that they were police.

"It was terrifying," the 32-year-old told AFP.

"I didn't know if they were arresting me, or where they were taking me. I thought that this is my last day on this Earth."

As with the other victims in this article, AFP has changed his name because of his fear of repercussions by the security forces.

The protests began in June over hugely unpopular tax rises proposed by President William Ruto. The marches were initially mostly peaceful until June 25 when protesters stormed parliament and were met with extreme violence by security forces.

The Kenya National Commission for Human Rights (KNCHR), a state-backed group, says at least 60 people died during the demonstrations, which continued into July.

But at least 74 were also abducted, and six months on, 26 are still missing.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) fears the actual numbers of

disappearances may be far higher, as many are too scared to report that relatives are missing.

“These police abductions and killings are taking the country back to its dark days,” warned KNCHR vice-chair Raymond Nyeris.

AFP made multiple requests for comment from Kenyan police, but they did not respond.

– Who sent you? –

John said that he was severely beaten while held in secret custody and that it was clear he was being punished for taking part in the protests.

His captors repeatedly asked: “Who sent me, who is our leader, who paid us?”

To John, the questions were absurd since the protests were a spontaneous show of anger by a young generation fed up with poor services, corruption and a lack of jobs.

Seven days later, John bribed his way to freedom, convincing one of his captors to message his sister in Nairobi and arrange a payment of 8,000 shillings (\$60).

“He had to make a phone call to the DCI (director of criminal investigations)... to see if he can release me.”

His captors photographed and finger-printed him, and kept his phone.

– ‘No accountability’ –

John’s story is common. Dozens of similar cases have been reported by local media.

Many are terrified to talk publicly, but AFP spoke with another man who was similarly snatched, beaten, held and then released without charges.

Two other families of missing people agreed to speak to AFP only to pull out an hour before meeting.

“I never talk to anyone. Even some of my friends, I’m scared to share with them,” said John.

Rights groups Amnesty International, HRW, KNCHR and VOCAL Africa all say Kenya’s security forces are behind the abductions.

“We believe strongly that the security agencies should answer,” KNCHR’s Nyeris said. “They are the ones who are responsible.”

HRW said its research pointed to a shadowy unit of officers drawn from multiple security agencies, including military intelligence and an anti-terrorism unit.

“The abductors know there will be no accountability,” HRW’s Otsieno Namwaya told AFP, urging an independent investigation.

– ‘Just vanished’ –

Abductions also appear to have taken place during the protests.

In September, rights group VOCAL Africa said they had testimonies about people being arrested by officers – some not in uniform – during the demonstrations “only for their lifeless bodies to be found days later.”

The thought haunts Faith, whose cousin, Joseph, “just vanished” on June 25.

The 24-year-old was not interested in politics and had only gone to the city centre to collect a parcel, she said.

“They thought he was a protester because of his age,” said Faith.

The family hoped Joseph was just injured in the unrest. Faith

visited hospital after hospital, and eventually morgues, but there was no sign.

“They just bring all the unidentified bodies, you try and identify,” said the 45-year-old mother-of-two. “It was very hard.”

The family contacted the police but they refused to help, dismissing missing persons as “the people who stormed parliament”.

“If they killed him, they should give us the body,” Faith said, sobbing.

“But if he’s alive, how is he? Has he been tortured, what has happened?”

– ‘Just lying’ –

On November 21, Ruto addressed the issue of abductions in his annual state of the nation speech.

Although he downplayed many claims as “fake news”, he also indicated that some of the accusations were true, saying: “I condemn any excessive or extrajudicial action which puts the life and liberty of any person at risk, including disappearances and threats to life.”

Ruto said families of those abducted should present their cases to the police watchdog.

“He’s just lying,” said John, who once supported Ruto, with a bitter laugh.

John has lost any hope for change and will not protest again.

“In Kenya, you don’t have the right.”

AFP