

#STOP EACOP

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 13, 2024

Human Rights Defender Found After Abduction and Six Days of Captivity

Kampala, Uganda - Stephen Kwikiriza, a member of the community affected by the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP)-associated Kingfisher oil project and a community observer with Environmental Governance Institute (EGI) Uganda, was finally released after being abandoned by his captors along the roadside in Kyenjojo district on Sunday, June 9th at around 8:30 p.m, approximately five hours drive from the site of his abduction in Kampala.

Mr Kwikiriza had been reported missing for six days after being abducted by plainclothes officers believed to be from the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF). Mr Kwikiriza is known for his outspoken criticism of the Kingfisher oil field activities operated by China National Offshore Oil Company (CNOOC). Moments before his phones were disabled, he sent a text message stating he had been arrested by members of the UPDF.

The UPDF has provided security for CNOOC's operations at the Kingfisher field since 2018, and local communities have accused the UPDF of [human rights violations](#), including seizing and burning fishing boats, arrests, sexual violence and other forms of abuse and mistreatment.

Mr Kwikiriza's disappearance sparked outrage among fellow Ugandan human rights and environmental advocates and the international community, including the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, [Mary Lawlor](#), who took to Twitter(X) to call for Mr Kwikiriza's release.

Mr Kwikiriza has recounted the harrowing details of his abduction and the six days he was held in captivity. During this time, he was subjected to appalling conditions: forced to strip down to his underwear and kept in a room with minimal food and only a bucket for sanitation. Upon his arrival at the location where he was held, Mr Kwikiriza was beaten and reported that he was knocked unconscious, a clear indication of the violent treatment he endured.

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Mr Kwikiriza has also informed the campaign that during his week-long detention, his captors repeatedly interrogated him regarding the interest of the international community in his disappearance and their pressure for his release.

The StopEACOP campaign and allied organizations call for a full, impartial investigation into this deeply concerning incident involving the abduction, unlawful detention, mistreatment and abuse of a prominent human rights defender.

Since the peaceful demonstration in front of the Chinese Embassy in Kampala on 27 May 2024, where 7 activists were arbitrarily arrested, several other Ugandans campaigning against the EACOP and related oil projects have faced forms of repression including, being arrested, searched, surveilled or, as in the case of Stephen Kwikiriza, abducted. Adriko Sostein, another representative of the communities affected by the Kingfisher oil project, was arrested and charged with unlawful assembly on 5 June 2024 by the police after presenting a petition concerning the Kingfisher oil project and its impacts on community members and climate change. He has been released on police bond but will need to present himself to police again today, 13 June 2024.

These cases come after many others with at least [56 intimidations](#) and abuses related to Total's Tilenga and EACOP projects recorded in Uganda and Tanzania, over a period of almost 4 and a half years.

We call for the immediate end of any forms of retaliation and repression of people who are critical of the EACOP and the associated oil projects. The concerns of affected people need to be heard and should be taken seriously by all the stakeholders who support or are considering supporting these projects.

Quotes:

“We condemn in the strongest terms the abduction of Kwikiriza Stephen and the abuse he has endured at the hands of his captors. This incident is especially concerning in light of the ongoing repression faced by environmental, land, and human rights defenders who speak out against EACOP and its associated projects. The perpetrators must be brought to book and the repression of activists and communities must come to an immediate end. The StopEACOP Campaign will continue to amplify the voices and demands of affected

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communities to decision-makers, undeterred by these attacks on our defenders. We remain steadfast in exercising our right to oppose projects that destroy lives and livelihoods." - **Zaki Mamdo, StopEACOP Campaign Coordinator**

"Abductions should not have a place in our country. What happened to Stephen is inhumane and unconstitutional, which should be condemned in the strongest possible manner. We now ask the government to look into, investigate and conclude the matter so that the captors are brought to book. In the meantime, as lawyers, we shall advise Stephen on any other further legal action." - **Brighton Aryampa, Attorney for Mr Kwikiriza**

"We strongly condemn the abduction of Kwikiriza Stephen and the violations he suffered over several days. Environmental defenders should be able to speak and act freely as they are essential in defending the rights of oil affected communities and in documenting the increasing human rights violations and environmental damages caused by Tilenga, Kingfisher and EACOP. Total has a clear legal liability in that sense. Its CEO repeatedly emphasizes that they are committed to respecting freedom of expression, yet they have been consistent in turning a blind eye on the increasing harassment, threats and arrests suffered by environmental defenders simply because they dare stand against these oil projects and denounce their impacts" **Juliette Renaud, Friends of the Earth France's Coordinator**

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