

Kenya Accused of Mass Killings

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kenya africa mungiki

Human rights campaigners in Kenya have accused police of carrying out hundreds of extrajudicial executions during an operation against the Mungiki criminal sect. A shadowy and fractured quasi-religious movement, the Mungiki were blamed for a string of grisly murders earlier this year.

The Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNHCR), an independent body set up by an act of Parliament, says it has evidence that almost 500 suspects were shot and their bodies dumped during the past five months. Researchers have spent three months collecting the data from mortuaries as relatives came forward claiming that their loved ones had disappeared. A police spokesman dismissed the allegations as nothing more than "rumors." However, Maina Kiai, director of the KNHCR, said police had yet to explain how hundreds of bodies had been delivered by police vehicle to mortuaries, yet the force had denied any involvement in the deaths. "Killing about 500 people without due process is a crime against humanity," Kiai told reporters in Nairobi as he presented his organization's report on the killings. "We want police to tell us how those 500 people ended up in the mortuary between June and October. The burden of proof lies with the police."

His report said the deaths were clinical killings. "Almost all the cadavers bear classic execution signs of a bullet behind the head exiting through the forehead," it said. The Mungiki (meaning multitude in the Kikuyu language) draw their inspiration from the Mau Mau guerrillas who rose against British colonial rule in the 1950s. They began in the 1980s as a quasi-religious movement to rid Kenya of cultural imperialism and return the country to its African traditions. Followers were believed to face Mount Kenya to pray and many grew their hair into dreadlocks.

But in recent years, analysts say, it has fragmented into a network of distinct organizations. Some are little more than gangster outfits — running protection rackets in the slums and collecting "taxes" from buses — while others have political programs or continue as a shadowy religious order. They are bound together by a secret oath often taken under duress. One former adherent said it was designed to humiliate the recruit and ensure his silence. "You are forced to eat some meat — you don't know what, maybe it is human meat — and all the time they are beating you," he said.

In recent years, the Mungiki have retreated into their slum strongholds of Nairobi. But they hit the headlines in April with a string of beheadings as they tussled for control of lucrative bus routes by executing drivers and conductors who refused to pay protection money. Analysts speculated that the Mungiki were also flexing their muscles ahead of elections due next month. Brutal police crackdowns began in June after officers were shot dead in a slum as they investigated Mungiki violence. Young men shaved off their dreadlocks or fled the city for fear of being caught up in the arrests.

Thirty people died in shootouts with police in the Mathare slum in Nairobi during a two-day operation in early June that was later condemned by Amnesty International. In all, officers said

they had rounded up 4,000 suspects. Kiai said he now had evidence that 454 bodies had been abandoned in Nairobi's mortuaries. Others, he said, were found in towns further afield or simply dumped in forests. Eric Kiraithe, spokesman for Kenya Police, denied the allegations. He claimed many of the bodies were victims of traffic accidents or gang warfare. "Who was there to say the victims were shot from behind and the bullets exited in front? These are reports aimed at maligning the force and individuals," he said.

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