

AFRICA

3 Kenyans Last Seen at Police Station Are Found Dead

By JEFFREY GETTLEMAN JULY 1, 2016

The bodies of three men who disappeared after last being seen at a police station in Kenya were discovered dumped in a river on Friday, bringing a grim end to a mystery that had deeply unsettled human rights activists, lawyers and many others in Kenya.

The body of one of the men, Willie Kimani, a well-regarded lawyer who had been assigned to the case of a man who was being harassed by police officers, was found with his hands and legs tied at the bottom of the Ol Donyo Sabuk River outside of Nairobi.

Next to him was the body of Joseph Muiruri, a taxi driver who disappeared with Mr. Kimani last week. Witnesses said Mr. Muiruri's eyes had been gouged out.

The third body found was that of Josephat Mwenda, a motorcycle taxi driver who had filed the complaint against the police officer, a dangerous move in Kenya.

“Our worst fears are confirmed,” said the Law Society of Kenya in a statement. “Advocates and citizens are at risk of elimination by police death squads.”

Kenya has long been plagued by corruption and violence, with a long history of impunity, but it is highly unusual for three people, including a well-connected professional, to suddenly disappear.

Mr. Kimani, 32, a father of two young boys, served as an investigator for the

International Justice Mission, a global organization that strives to protect poor people from violence. He had been assigned to help Mr. Mwenda, who had accused the police of harassing him for more than a year after he filed a report that an officer had unlawfully shot him in the arm.

Last Thursday, Mr. Mwenda and Mr. Kimani appeared in a court on the outskirts of Nairobi, Kenya's capital. After they left the courthouse in Mr. Muiruri's taxi, family members could not reach them on their cellphones.

Hours later, colleagues said, at least two of the men were seen at a remote police station, locked in a metal container, shouting for help. One of the men threw a note out a window. It had been hastily scribbled on toilet paper.

It read: Call my wife. I'm in danger.

The International Justice Mission, a Christian group based in Northern Virginia, immediately got in touch with contacts in Congress and at the State Department. Within hours, phones were ringing in Nairobi.

American law enforcement agents are assisting in the investigation, which human rights activists say is pointing to a cabal of corrupt police officers suspected of abducting and killing the three men as a way to make the complaints against a senior officer go away.

"You have to be out of your mind to think you could get away with this," said Maina Kiai, one of Kenya's leading human rights activists. "This is not Rwanda or Ethiopia. In Kenya, there's going to be an outcry if you do something like this."

Kenya is considered one of the more open democracies in Africa. Mr. Kiai said that while some lawyers and professionals had been jailed during Kenya's dictatorship days in the 1980s and '90s, he could not recall a case of a lawyer being brazenly abducted, even then.

"It's a first," he said. "It's scary. People are now saying: Who's next?"

Police officials have said little about the disappearances. An elite unit called the Flying Squad has been assigned to investigate, but it has a checkered reputation

itself, suspected of many unlawful deaths.

On Friday evening, human rights activists said four police officers had been arrested in connection with the killings of Mr. Kimani, Mr. Mwenda and Mr. Muiruri.

“The deaths of Willie, Josephat and Joseph are an intolerable outrage and should serve as an abrupt wake-up call to the blatant injustices committed daily and incessantly against the poor and vulnerable around the world,” said Gary Haugen, chief executive of International Justice Mission. “This must be the beginning of the end of impunity in Kenya, once and for all.”

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Reuben Kyama contributed reporting from Nairobi, Kenya.

A version of this article appears in print on July 2, 2016, on page A4 of the New York edition with the headline: Kenyans' Deaths Raise Fears of Police Tactics.

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