

Amnesty International on Monday accused Ugandan security forces of using excessive force against opposition rallies, including arbitrary arrests, intimidation, and alleged torture, raising concerns over human rights in the run-up to the country's Jan. 15 presidential election.

The human rights group documented incidents in November in Kawempe and Iganga, where police reportedly used tear gas, pepper spray, batons, and rifles as blunt-force weapons against largely peaceful crowds. In Kawempe, an eyewitness said officers unleashed dogs to "intimidate the crowd," while another in Iganga said police blocked exits with vehicles before opening fire, resulting in at least one death and multiple injuries.

Amnesty reported that more than 400 people have been arrested for attending or supporting opposition rallies, and that authorities imposed road closures and rerouted protestors onto longer routes.

Tigere Chagutah, Amnesty International's regional director for East and Southern Africa, warned that the repression is making it increasingly difficult for citizens to exercise their rights to freedom of assembly and association. "The authorities have launched a brutal campaign of repression against the opposition and its supporters," Chagutah said. "Ugandan authorities must allow rallies to proceed without undue restrictions or ill-treatment of leaders and supporters."

International law requires police to use non-violent methods for crowd control first, and any force must be proportionate and designed to minimize injury, Amnesty noted. Ugandan authorities have defended their actions, saying officers responded after attendees stoned police and vandalized vehicles, but eyewitnesses insisted the crowds were peaceful and "only carried the Ugandan national flag."

The incidents come as President Yoweri Museveni, seeking to extend his 40-year rule, faces a strong challenge from opposition candidate Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, known as Bobi Wine. Wine has repeatedly described his campaign as a battle, citing the deployment of soldiers and police vehicles and alleging attacks on his supporters.

Amnesty International called for "impartial and thorough investigations" of the reported abuses, with fair trials and no recourse to the death penalty. UN Human Rights Chief Volker Türk also urged Ugandan authorities to end the repression and investigate alleged violations.