



# “Enemies of the state”: Uganda targets climate activists in quiet crackdown

By John Okot

[John Okot](#) is a freelance journalist based in Gulu, northern Uganda.

*Activists say the government is using arrests and psychological torture to avoid signs of abuse that could lead to bad publicity for investors in the East Africa Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP).*



Bob Barigye, an environmental activist and Project Coordinator of conservation group Mother Nature, in Kampala, Uganda. Source: John Okot.

In December 2022, climate activist Bob Barigye, 34, found himself faced with a life-changing decision. The biology teacher had already become far more involved in a nationwide campaign against a controversial oil pipeline than he might have dreamt of a few years ago. But now, he had to decide whether or not to step up as the movement’s new leader.

Barigye knew the risks of accepting

such a position – the previous head campaigner had just stepped down to recover from trauma experienced in [police detention](#) (Matovu, 2022) – but he also knew the size and significance of the task ahead. He agreed to spearhead the loose movement of determined activists.

One of Barigye’s first tasks was to lead a dialogue to discuss the [dangers](#) of the East Africa Crude Oil Pipeline ([EACOP](#)) ([#StopEACOP](#), 2022). The planned project is intended to transport oil 1,443km from oil fields in [Uganda](#) to the port of Tanga in Tanzania. Campaigners say it will displace 14,000 households, cause irreversible environmental damage, and generate 34 million tonnes of carbon emissions annually.

The meeting to discuss these risks was set for 24 January, the same day President Yoweri Museveni [unveiled](#) the first of four oil rigs that are part of the mega project (Biryabarema, 2023). In advance of the gathering, Barigye gained approval from the police. And so, that morning, he stood by the entrance to the hotel venue in the capital, Kampala, waiting to greet the environmentalists, activists, government officials, and politicians who had agreed to participate. Shortly before the event was due to begin, however, a team of police officers swept through the building.

“They began checking every hotel room looking for me,” says Barigye. “They were also chasing away our guests who had come for the dialogue. When I tried to negotiate with them,

they arrested me for obstructing justice and for failing to follow the Public Order Management Act”.

Barigye suspects that the security forces “deliberately sabotaged” the dialogue at the last minute when they learnt that leading opposition figures Kizza Besigye and Robert Kyagulanyi (aka Bobi Wine) were among the invited guests.

The police broke up the meeting and kept Barigye in a cell for four days, during which time the activist says he was “psychologically tortured”.

“They threatened my life and family,” he says. “They dragged me into a filthy cell, made me starve...I could not sleep as they would interrogate me at any time of the night.”

## “THE POLICE NOW PREFERS PSYCHOLOGICAL TORTURE”

The Museveni regime, which has been in power for the past 36 years, is no stranger to cracking down on dissenting voices and detaining critics. As reported in *African Arguments*, security forces [abducted](#) over 1,000 people in the run-up to the 2021 elections, many of whom are still [unaccounted for](#) (Taylor and Wandera, 2021; 2022). More recently, the police have [arrested](#) a prominent opposition politician and [shut down](#) the country’s UN human rights office shortly after it had raised serious concerns about the behaviour of Uganda’s security services (Athumani, 2022; Okiror, 2023). >>

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What is new, according to climate activists, is the degree to which these repressive tactics are now being used to clamp down on movements opposed to EACOP. In the last couple of years, [several](#) activists calling for the pipeline to be scrapped have been [arrested](#), while dozens of NGOs – including numerous environmental organisations – have been forcibly [shut down](#) (*The Independent*, 2021; Kikongo, 2022; Biryabarema, 2021).

Barigye suggests that the government is particularly targeting the leaders of Uganda’s climate movement due to their greater influence. He alleges that security forces are using “bogus charges” to detain activists and then deliberately using psychological rather than physical violence to avoid leaving more visible evidence of abuse.

“We are looked at as the enemies of the state,” says Barigye. “The police now prefers psychological torture because physical torture will create bad publicity around the oil pipeline project, which could push away investors and insurers...The government doesn’t want to be in the international spotlight for the wrong reasons”.

According to Barigye, it was this strategy that forced his predecessor, Jackson Ssemwanga, to step back from activism in December 2022. That month, the 37-year-old was arrested after he and three others, including Barigye, walked to the offices of the National Environmental



Construction work for EACOP near Lake Albert, where oil exploration activities are also taking place. Credit: John Okot.

Management Authority (NEMA) to call on the government agency to re-evaluate EACOP’s Environmental and Social Impact Assessment.

The police detained the four activists for four days. Three of them were held together, but Ssemwanga was moved to an unknown separate location. When they were released, the former anti-EACOP leader said he was quitting activism. Unlike the other three, Ssemwanga was not charged in court.

“Until now, he still doesn’t want to talk about what they did to him,” says Barigye. “Maybe the police threatened his life or his family. We still don’t know”.

When *African Arguments* contacted Ssemwanga to ask for his version of events, he said by phone: “I can’t do that because it’s not safe for me ... My friends can continue with their activism, but as for me, I am taking a break”.

Dickens Kamugisha, Chief Executive of the Kampala-based African Institute for Energy Governance (AFIEGO), also believes that the government is trying to instil fear among activists. The police forcibly shut down his organisation in October 2021 and [detained](#) five of its staff for 72 hours (*The Independent*,

2021). It dramatically re-arrested the employees, along with Kamugisha for the first time, days later.

“The government is full of greedy people who want to benefit from this oil pipeline at the expense of the environment, and they are willing to do anything with impunity because laws don’t mean anything to them,” says Kamugisha, who argues that the act used to justify AFIEGO’s closure down was misapplied.

Human rights activist and lawyer Maxwell Atuhura suggests the government uses “abnormal charges” against activists to “discredit them and make them appear like they are the real criminals in the eyes of the public”. He was arrested in 2021 on charges of “inciting violence” while investigating communities who had been displaced by EACOP but not compensated. Ever since, Atuhura has been on police bond, meaning he still has to report to a police station regularly while his case officially remains open. The lawyer says he has effectively been “banished” from his home in the Albertine region, where he was working, and that he continues to be intimidated.



“Sometimes strangers follow me when I am moving,” he says. “In my home village in Buliisa district [in the Albertine region], my family are also living in fear because the police [can] come at any time of the night to check if I am there”.

Beatrice Rukanyanga, founder of Kwatamiza Farmers group, which has been supporting displaced households seeking compensation and was also temporarily shut down in 2021, says it is increasingly difficult to speak out. “When you campaign against cutting forests or an oil pipeline because it affects the future generation, you are looked at as opposition, a sign that you are not free in your own country,” she says. “You are intimidated for expressing your views”.

Speaking to *African Arguments*, Kampala Metropolitan Deputy Police Spokesperson, Luke Owoyesigire, said allegations of psychological torture against activists are “just baseless” and that police apply “reasonable force” to get information from suspects.

“I don’t understand how one can measure psychological torture or its magnitude,” he added. “If the activists have a case, let them come and report it”.

Uganda’s government spokesperson, Ofwono Opondo, simply described climate activists as “a group of attention seekers who have failed to appreciate the oil pipeline is meant to benefit all Ugandans”.

Climate activists in Uganda say they want to hold a peaceful dialogue with the government about EACOP, which is largely owned by **TotalEnergies**. They say they wish to discuss the dangers the oil pipeline poses to biodiverse areas like Murchison Falls National Park and Lake Victoria, through which it will pass. They want to hold meaningful debates about cleaner ways to generate energy and revenue for the country. Yet instead of words, they say the government has responded with harassment, intimidation, detention, and torture.

Activists like Barigye believe the

government is desperate to avoid the public being informed about the risks associated with the pipeline. He has taken to teaching school students about the dangers of fossil fuels through his Green Club, which has over 250 members across Kampala.

“I want to train young people into a generation of climate activists who can take up our places when we are not around,” he says.

However, even this approach faces difficulties. Barigye was fired by the school he taught at in 2017 partly because of fears his activities would attract police attention.

“Our government doesn’t want the people to have information about the oil pipeline because when they do, they are going to rise up and ask them the hard questions,” he says.

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