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Kenya: Human rights defender Chris Owalla brutally attacked

On 9 February 2024, human rights defender **Chris Owalla** was brutally attacked by a group of more than seven armed individuals in Bondo Sub-County located in the Siaya County, as he was leaving the funeral of local journalist Dickens Ochieng Wasongain. The attack is believed to be a reprisal for Chris Owalla's filing of several legal complaints before the High Court of Kenya against the County Government of Siaya on mismanagement of public funds.

[Chris Owalla](#) is a human rights defender who advocates for social and environmental justice. Chris Owalla has also campaigned against corruption and mismanagement of public funds since 2013, and has previously appeared on Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), one of the local media outlets, pointing out that the county public service of Siaya lacked transparency and is not complying with the available legislations and laws guiding public participation. He further stated that engagement should start at the sector level and this should include stakeholders scaling down to the ward and village level. Chris Owalla serves as the Executive Director of Community Initiative Action Group – Kenya, which is a human rights, social justice and social policy organisation founded in 2005. He is also the coordinator of the Siaya Civil Society Network, a civil society organisation working in the western part of Kenya to promote good governance, transparency and accountability in the management of public affairs. Additionally, Chris Owalla is a steering committee member of Kenya Devolution Civil Society Organisations Working Group (KDCWG), a national umbrella platform of CSOs from the 47 County CSOs networks of Kenya. The overall objective of the KDCWG is to contribute to effectiveness in the implementation of devolution in Kenya and the fulfillment of the devolution promises as stipulated in the Constitution of Kenya.

On 9 February 2024, human rights defender Chris Owalla was brutally attacked by a group of more than seven armed people in Bondo Sub-County located in the Siaya County, as he was leaving the funeral of local journalist Dickens Ochieng Wasongain. Chris Owalla was beaten and suffered severe injuries to his knee, elbow, chest and back. His clothes were ripped off and was robbed of money and various personal belongings. Following the attack, the human rights defender was treated at Agha Khan Hospital in Kisumu and is due to receive additional medical evaluation on the week 19th February 2024..

According to the human rights defender, the attackers said that he was stirring up controversy for Siaya's County Government and the Governor, and specifically referred to a court case he instituted against the County Government for irregular employment of

staff. In 2020 and 2023, human rights defender Chris Owalla lodged several complaints against the County Government of Siaya, requesting that the core principles of budget transparency, public participation, and accountability be upheld in the recruitment process of state and public officers, as well as requesting an end to the alleged region's illegal land grabbing by public authorities. The attack seems to be a reprisal for the complaints filed by the human rights defender in October 2023, and one of the armed men was reportedly recognized by the human rights defender as the driver of a local authority.

It is not the first time Chris Owalla faces retaliation for his human rights work. On 14 January 2020, there was a break in at the Community Initiative Action Group – Kenya's office. A few files and the office computer were taken by the attackers. Afterwards, the individuals involved dragged a former colleague of the human rights defender, Miss Carren Anyango Adhola from the office to her house, which was near the office, sexually assaulted her and killed her. At the time of the assault, Chris Owalla was working on a corruption case in the Siaya County Government and of illegal land grabbing.

On 04 July 2020, the human rights defender Chris Owalla reported being harassed and physically attacked at Ugunja Township in Siaya County, the aggressor claimed that the defender was constantly raising issues that were not in the interest of the County Governor. Chris Owalla made a report at Ugunja Police Station (OB Number 34/06/07/2020) two days after the incident, identifying the aggressor to be a Siaya County Executive Committee Member for Governance and Administration. However, there has not been any investigation to date to bring the responsible to justice.

Front Line Defenders strongly condemns the attack against human rights defender Chris Owalla. Front Line Defenders also raises its concerns at the continuous threats and harassment against human rights defender, and believes this to be a form of intimidation carried out against him in reprisal for his legitimate and peaceful work in the defence of human rights. Front Line Defenders reiterates its concern that these attacks may have an intimidating effect on the community of human rights defenders in Kenya, particularly those who advocate for transparency and accountability in government institutions.

Front Line Defenders urges the relevant authorities in Kenya to:

1. Strongly condemn the brutal physical attack of human rights defender Chris Owalla;
2. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the threats and attacks against human rights defender Chris Owalla with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
3. Guarantee in all circumstances that human rights defenders in Kenya are able to carry out their peaceful and legitimate human rights work without fear or reprisals, and free of all restrictions, including judicial harassment.