

## **Testimony of Willis Shalita**

Hearing on Developments in Rwanda

Committee on Foreign Affairs — Africa Subcommittee

U.S. House of Representatives

May 20, 2015

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Bass, Distinguished Members — it is an honor to be invited to testify at this important hearing. Thank you very much for this opportunity.

It makes me happy to see such a wide range of viewpoints included. This diversity is a demonstration of your commitment to keep strengthening the partnership between Rwanda and the United States.

No topic is closer to my heart. My name is Willis Shalita, and I am a proud American, and an equally proud Rwandan. But at one time, I had no country at all.

In the early 1960s, hundreds of thousands of Rwandans were expelled from our homeland in an orchestrated campaign of ethnic cleansing. I lived in exile in Uganda, up until Idi Amin's reign of terror forced me to become a refugee for the second time.

America welcomed me with open arms, some 42 years ago. In this country, I found not only a home, but also a lifelong vocation as a special investigator with the California State Bar, where I examined allegations of attorney misconduct.

My job was to separate fact from fiction, build the strongest case possible, and then testify under oath about my findings, so that the law could run its course. I did so hundreds of times over my 28-year career as an officer of the court.

My life has been about fighting against dictatorship, persecution, and injustice, in whatever way I can. Today, I do so primarily as a writer, through a weekly blog on social and political developments in America and Africa, with a particular focus on Rwanda.

After the 1994 Genocide, a million Rwandans lay dead, around 15% of the population. The state coffers were looted, and insecurity was rampant. No one had any real idea how justice could be rendered to survivors and accused perpetrators, much less how to live together again. Rwanda was a country that could afford only the most modest ambitions for itself.

Twenty-one years later, Rwanda stands out. Let me highlight a few examples.

Rwanda leads the world in women's representation in Parliament, with nearly two-thirds.

Rwanda is building a culture of entrepreneurship, self-reliance, and free enterprise. It has emerged as one of the top performers in the World Bank's annual *Doing Business* index, it ranks No. 1 in the world among low-income countries, and 46<sup>th</sup> globally.<sup>1</sup>

Rwanda is investing massively in the well-being of citizens, as well. Professor Paul Farmer of Harvard Medical School found that over the last decade, the Rwandan health system "achieved some of the steepest declines in premature mortality ever documented anywhere".<sup>2</sup> Global health funding from the United States played an important role in this success.

Rwanda shoulders its share of the burden for international peace and security. It is the fifth-largest contributor to UN Peacekeeping missions globally. Here again, there is strategic partnership with the United States. In early 2014, when Rwanda agreed to deploy forces to the Central African Republic within a fortnight to help halt a terrifying descent into communal violence, it was the U.S. Air Force that got the troops there in time to make a difference.

Religious freedom is protected in Rwanda, and the faith sector is vibrant and dynamic. Moreover, Rwanda's leaders continually re-affirm the intrinsic value of each and every life. Last year, campaigns on road safety and human trafficking were launched. Numerous Rwandans trafficked abroad, including minors, have already been rescued and brought home.

Parliament's decision not to decriminalize abortion also falls under this rubric. I know there is a wide range of perspectives on this matter, including even my own. But I have no doubt that the law springs from a broader culture of valuing human life.

At the very same time, Parliament also voted not to criminalize homosexuality, bucking the African trend. Rwanda is a socially conservative country, but at least gays and lesbians do not have to worry about the state interfering in private matters. Rwanda is not afraid to vote its conscience to either, regularly teaming up with the United States to defeat efforts to remove anti-homophobia provisions in international human rights instruments.

Now, at this point, some of you may be thinking to yourselves, "Okay, sure, *but...*"

"Yes, great, *but...*"

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.doingbusiness.org/data/exploreeconomies/rwanda>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bmj.com/content/346/bmj.f65> and

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/12/29/paul-farmers-graph-of-the-year-rwandas-plummeting-child-mortality-rate/>

But why does there always have to be a “but”? The facts are real. The data come from trusted, independent sources such as academia, international organizations, NGOs, and even regular Gallup polls that ask Rwandans themselves what they think.<sup>3</sup>

Is Rwanda perfect? Not even close. But logically, it should be possible to offer robust critiques of Rwanda’s policies and performance without disparaging its most remarkable achievements.

Let me tell you the best way to uncover the juiciest “secrets” about waste, fraud, and misconduct: Come to Rwanda. The dirty laundry is hanging out for all to see.

Parliamentary committees, the Ombudsman, the Human Rights Commission, the Rwanda Governance Board, the evaluation of the performance contracts that all public officials sign each year, the soul-searching discussions at the annual national leadership retreat.

Come watch how Rwandans interact with their leaders on Twitter in real time, and get results. Come attend a citizen outreach meeting in a rural district, and then tell me if you still think that Rwandans are too intimidated to speak truth to power. I assure you, they are not.

The truth is that the most scandalous data about Rwanda is made public by Rwanda’s own institutions. There are also dozens of private media outlets whose muckraking gets overlooked by outsiders because they operate only in Kinyarwanda.

Rwanda now even has a comprehensive freedom of information law, and already a private NGO has set up a web portal that citizens and journalists can use to harangue government departments into complying with the disclosure rules.<sup>4</sup>

Not convinced? No problem, just check in with some of the thousands of Americans who have settled in Rwanda to start businesses, churches, and non-profits, not to mention the 100,000 Americans who visited the country last year alone.

So why do we find ourselves, time and time again, in this strange Bermuda Triangle of confusion, which tends to overpower any effort to conduct reasonable, fact-based conversations about Rwanda?

To prepare for this hearing, I put my investigator hat back on, to see if I could make some sense of it. How is it that some of the very people who once proudly contributed to Rwanda’s success, now calmly assert that stats are fake, foreign eyewitnesses are dupes, and Rwanda is some kind of tropical North Korea?

---

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.gallup.com/topic/country\\_rwa.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/topic/country_rwa.aspx)

<sup>4</sup> <https://sobanukirwa.rw/>

And why does anyone believe them, when the mountain of contrary evidence is so high?

The answer is simpler than I thought: politics and money.

The House lobbying disclosure database records that a fellow witness, Dr. Himbara, who works as a “human rights advocate and good governance consultant”, personally hired a top-tier DC lobbying firm in August 2014. He paid them \$70,000 in the first quarter of this year, and a total of \$190,000 since the contract started.<sup>5</sup>

If that’s his money, then I want whatever consulting gigs he is doing. If it’s not all his, then I think this committee deserves to know the true source of the funds.

I also noticed that the domain name for the fancy website of the new organization that two witnesses today represent, Democracy in Rwanda Now (DIRN), was registered only about a week ago, on May 13, 2015.<sup>6</sup> I suppose it could be a coincidence that the invitation to this hearing would have arrived around the same moment.

That’s fine. We could all use better websites. But why the sudden need for a brand new platform? Was something wrong with whatever affiliations were being used before?

I can’t say, but I found that Mr. Higiuro also serves as a senior cadre for the Rwandan National Congress (RNC), a foreign political party whose leaders openly state their commitment to the violent overthrow of the Rwandan government and the assassination of its president. RNC have even resorted to collaborating with the FDLR, a terrorist organization made up of the remnants of the groups responsible for the Genocide.

If I were in Mr. Higiuro’s shoes, I would also want to put a different face forward to the U.S. Congress.

So a lot of money is being spent to circulate disinformation about Rwanda to decision-makers and opinion-makers in this country. People have a right to do that, provided they follow the rules. But I for one am curious to know who is bankrolling it. How else can the credibility of any claims that emerge from this shadowy network be assessed?

Maybe I am naïve, but my experience is that truth is more or less free for the picking. But if you want to get people to believe lies, well, that’s going to cost you.

I believe that this malicious political campaign weakens the strong bilateral relationship between Rwanda and America, which would ironically make the U.S. less effective as a trusted partner accompanying Rwanda towards its highest goals.

---

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.opensecrets.org/lobby/client\\_reports.php?id=F46923](https://www.opensecrets.org/lobby/client_reports.php?id=F46923)

<sup>6</sup> Whois registration data for <http://democracyinrwandanow.org> can be found at <http://who.is/whois/democracyinrwandanow.org>.

But I suppose that is exactly the point. We must not let cynicism prevail over common sense, reason, and the defense of the core human values that my two beloved countries share in equal strength and measure.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, Distinguished Members — thank you for your kind attention. I look forward to responding to questions. Given my late addition to this panel, may I also respectfully request that my full written testimony be accepted for inclusion in the official record. Thank you again.