

**TESTIMONY OF  
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**BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON AFRICA, GLOBAL HEALTH, GLOBAL HUMAN  
RIGHTS AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS  
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**“DEVELOPMENTS IN RWANDA”**

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass and Members of the House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations. Thank you for holding this important hearing on Rwanda and for the opportunity to speak today.

Rwanda holds a very personal connection for me. Fifteen years ago I first went to Rwanda as a fellow with the International Rescue Committee. I spent a year in the country supporting its efforts to recover from war and genocide – helping unaccompanied children and youth reintegrate back into their communities, working with villages to provide access to clean water, and traveling throughout the country to try to better understand what gives people the capacity to pick up their feet and move forward after such a shattering experience. Living in Rwanda had a profound impact on me and has been a key inspiration for my decision to pursue a career in foreign policy and human rights.

Indeed, Rwanda’s progress since the 1994 genocide has been remarkable. Rwanda’s GDP has grown at an estimated annual rate of 7 percent, youth literacy rates have improved from 65 percent in 2000 to 77 percent in 2010, and child and infant death rates have plummeted, going from an under-5 mortality rate of 152 children out of every 1,000 in 1990 to just 52 out of 1,000 in 2013. Rwanda also plays a crucial role in international peacekeeping operations, and has made great strides in its inclusion of women at all levels of government. Several years ago I paid a return visit to Kigali, and I found a city profoundly changed. Modern office towers have replaced dilapidated buildings. The streets were spotless – thanks in

part to a widely acclaimed ban on plastic bags. New businesses seemed to be springing up daily, such as coffee ventures supplying top quality beans to U.S. brands like Starbucks and Peet's.

But this is only part of the story. Alongside Rwanda's remarkable development progress, there have been equally consistent efforts to reduce space for independent voices and to diminish the ability of the media, opposition groups, and civil society to operate. This space matters. It is essential not only for democratic progress, but for cementing Rwanda's impressive economic and development gains.

When it comes to the human rights situation in Rwanda, we see three trends of note. First, political space in Rwanda and the overall human rights environment continues to shrink. There are reports of targeted killings, and an increasing number of reports of disappearances and harassment of civil society groups and opposition parties. Second, this trend is reinforcing the wrong lessons for Rwanda—particularly that a country can continue to experience robust economic growth and foreign investment even while repressing its citizens further and reducing democratic space. This is not a sustainable path. At some point – if unchecked - human rights violations will begin to affect Rwanda's economic performance, stability and the willingness of foreign investors to bring in outside capital and do business in the country. Third, Rwanda's human rights record is setting a disturbing precedent for the region and continent. Other countries are carefully watching Rwanda's model of economic liberalization and political repression. In my discussions, counterparts frequently point to Rwanda and question whether protecting the rights of their citizens matters if they can achieve substantial economic development.

The answer, of course, is that protecting the rights of all of Rwanda's citizens and residents matters immensely to Rwanda's long term stability and prosperity, to its continued positive economic trajectory, and to whether other countries recognize they can follow a similar path to greater prosperity. When governments repress fundamental freedoms and universal human rights, international investment can falter because this repression is a sign of societal fissures that can lead to instability and violence. This is also true when governments stifle civil society organizations that provide checks and balances on

corruption and increase government accountability. Rwanda can be a model for the region, or it can slip backwards over time, never truly fulfilling its potential.

We have articulated our concerns about Rwanda's human rights record for years directly to Rwanda's senior leaders, including President Kagame, and we have highlighted the deteriorating situation in Rwanda, through the State Department's annual human rights report. The Department's 2013 human rights report for Rwanda noted that the government targeted political opponents and human rights advocates for harassment, arrest, and abuse. It reported that the government disregarded the rule of law and placed significant restrictions on the enjoyment of freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association, as well as restrictions on press freedoms. It observed that the government harassed and placed substantial limitations on local and international NGOs, particularly organizations that monitored and reported on human rights. And it highlighted reports that arbitrary or unlawful killings took place both inside and outside Rwanda.

The credibility of elections provides an important indication of the level of space for independent voices and views. Unfortunately, Presidential elections in 2010 and parliamentary elections in 2013 were beset by irregularities both in the pre-electoral period and on Election Day. Part of this is due to the passing in 2008 of the "genocide ideology" law, which was intended to restrict any actions that could lead to genocide. In practice, the government has used this law to impede the activities of opposition parties, opposition candidates, and civil society organizations. In the 2010 elections, in which President Kagame was reelected with 93 percent of the vote, there was a lack of critical opposition voices in the pre-election period, opposition political parties were unable to register, and two opposition party leaders were arrested on what appear to be spurious charges. Two unregistered political parties were unable to field presidential candidates due to legal or administrative issues.

International observers reported that Rwanda's 2013 parliamentary elections also failed to meet standards for free and fair elections. While the elections were calm and well organized, there were numerous irregularities, including the presence of security officials in polling rooms, multiple voting, and local election officials filling out ballots in the absence of voters. Rwandan electoral officials

denied U.S. Embassy observers access to polling stations and vote tabulation centers, thereby making it impossible to verify the accuracy of the final vote count and official participation rate. Rwanda's next presidential election is in 2017, and we are cautiously hopeful that this election will mark an improvement upon previous contests.

Our concerns about restrictions on press freedom, freedom of assembly, expression, and association extend beyond electoral processes. Most Rwandan news outlets follow party lines. Rwandan journalists self-censor their work, and some have fled the country out of fear of government harassment. The Rwandan government has also stepped up its use of a law amended in 2012 that allows security officials to monitor online communications. During the period surrounding the 20-year genocide commemoration in spring 2014, the country's few remaining independent journalists were increasingly targeted for harassment and arrest. This led the United States to issue a statement in June 2014 expressing deep concern about the arrest and disappearance of dozens of Rwandan citizens and credible reports that individual journalists were being threatened, and in some cases directly censored.

We are also deeply troubled by the succession of what appear to be politically motivated murders of prominent Rwandan exiles. This includes the December 2013 killing of former Rwandan government official Colonel Patrick Karegeya, who was found dead in a hotel room in South Africa. Months later, armed men raided the South African home of former Rwandan Army Chief of Staff Kayumba Nyamwasa, who had previously been targeted for assassination attempts. President Kagame's 2014 statements about "consequences" for those who betray Rwanda has further heightened these concerns.

Also of deep concern are corpses that appeared in Lake Rweru, along the border between Rwanda and Burundi, between July and October in 2014. Fishermen reported seeing dozens of floating bodies, some bound and wrapped in sacks, four of which were recovered and buried in Burundi. Fishermen reported that on the nights of September 21 and 22, Rwandan marines attempted to exhume the bodies, allegedly to return them to Rwanda. Both Rwanda and Burundi called for a joint investigation into the identity and origin of the bodies. In December, Burundi's minister of foreign affairs accepted an offer of forensic

assistance funded by the United States and several other donor governments for an investigation led by the African Union. Rwandan officials stated that the government also supported a joint investigation, but no investigation has been conducted. The United States continues to press the African Union to move forward with an investigation into these killings and accountability for those responsible.

As a close partner with Rwanda on many global and regional issues, we have and will continue to maintain a close dialogue with the government on these concerns, while recognizing their strong policies and actions with respect to issues of concern, such as human rights, open space for civil society, women's rights, the rights of LGBTI persons, and access to health and education.

In closing, Rwanda is an important ally. It is a respected contributor to peacekeeping missions throughout the region, it has rebuilt itself from genocide, and it has achieved impressive development and economic gains. I have seen with my own eyes the remarkable progress that Rwanda has made. I believe there is a bright future ahead for its people, which is why Rwanda's current human rights situation is so personally disappointing to me. Ensuring respect for freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, and respect for the rule of law is essential for cementing, and building from these gains. The United States will continue to urge Rwanda to respect the rights of all its citizens

Thank you very much and I welcome your questions.