

**Statement by Acting Assistant Secretary Donald Yamamoto,
Bureau of African Affairs
“Rwanda: Democracy Thwarted”
House Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights,
and International Organizations**

Wednesday, September 27, 2017, 3:00PM

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Bass, and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the invitation to testify today on U.S. efforts to support democracy in Rwanda. Democracy, along with good governance, is one of the four strategic purposes that guide our engagement with our African partners, together with increasing economic growth and investment, advancing peace and security, and countering the scourge of terrorism.

The United States has a close but complex relationship with Rwanda. The country has striven to rebuild after the 1994 genocide in which more than 800,000 people were killed in the span of about 100 days. Over the past 23 years, Rwanda has made remarkable gains in recovering from this tragedy.

At the same time, Rwanda’s record in the areas of human rights and democracy, while improved in some areas, remains a concern. U.S. policy toward Rwanda seeks to support those areas where the government continues to make progress, and urges the government to affect change where it needs to do more, especially in expanding space for political dialogue and competition, and to take steps toward a democratic transition of power.

Since the genocide, Rwanda’s progress in the fields of health and development has been dramatic, and we have been a proud partner in this process. Over the last decade child mortality has been reduced by two-thirds, and life expectancy has risen from 49 years in 1995 to 64.5 in 2016. HIV/AIDS prevalence among adults has dropped from 4.7% to 3.1% in the same time period. With support from the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), the Government of Rwanda has also reduced HIV transmission to newborns to just two percent.

Likewise, economic growth and opportunity have been important aspects of our partnership with Rwanda for over 20 years. From 2000 to 2015, Rwanda’s economic growth averaged between 7 and 8 percent, and Rwanda currently ranks

56th out of 190 countries in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index – the second-highest in Africa. Rwanda has become a model in leveraging development assistance into concrete results for its people and has reduced its dependence on foreign assistance by more than half in the last decade.

Rwanda is also a major contributor to regional peace and security. It is the fifth-largest contributor of peacekeepers in the world – remarkable for a country of just under 12 million people. Rwandan troops are regionally respected and disciplined, and they have participated in UN peacekeeping operations in the Central African Republic, Sudan, Haiti, and Mali, among others. In South Sudan, Rwanda recently deployed additional peacekeeping troops as part of the UN's Regional Protection Force. Rwanda is a priority partner in the Africa Peacekeeping Rapid Response Partnership (APRRP) and has been a leader in reforming the African Union so that it is better prepared to resolve regional conflicts. President Kagame will take over the rotating chairmanship of the AU in January 2018 for the following year.

Despite these positive areas, we continue to have serious concerns about weak democratic institutions, freedom of speech, and respect for human rights in Rwanda. There have been several important developments since this Subcommittee's last similarly-themed hearing on Rwanda in May 2015.

In December 2015, Rwandan voters approved a package of constitutional amendments including one that enabled President Kagame to stay in power beyond the two-term limit contained in Rwanda's constitution. In the run-up to that decision, we engaged in extensive public and private diplomacy, urging President Kagame to honor the commitment he had made to respect term limits when he first assumed office. The constitutional amendments allowed President Kagame, who has been in office since 2000, to run for a third term, which he has since done (and won). He could potentially stay in office until 2034, when he will turn 77 years old. Immediately after the referendum's passage, we publicly expressed deep disappointment with President Kagame's decision. We continue to publicly and privately emphasize our conviction that constitutional transitions of power are essential for strong democracies everywhere, and that efforts by incumbents to change rules to stay in power weaken democratic institutions and undermine long-term stability.

The August 4 presidential elections illustrate that democracy in Rwanda remains far from perfect. As you know, President Kagame was re-elected with an official tally of nearly 99 percent of the vote, in an election with notable shortcomings. In an August 5 statement, we said we were disturbed by the voting irregularities we

observed and reiterated long-standing concerns over the integrity of the vote-counting process. Three aspiring candidates were disqualified before the election, and we expressed concern with the lack of transparency in that process. As we noted in our statement, we hope that these concerns will be addressed before the 2018 parliamentary elections.

Compared to the previous presidential elections in 2010, however, we noted some progress. This was the first election in which the Democratic Green Party, the main registered opposition party in Rwanda, was allowed to participate. The Rwandan media also reported on the harassment of some opposition candidates, and government officials took action to address those complaints – in some cases by arresting local officials.

Since the election, Rwandan authorities have targeted several political opposition figures for questioning or arrest. We are concerned by and are following closely the case of Diane Rwigara, one of the three disqualified presidential aspirants. Police raided her home on August 29 and arrested Ms. Rwigara and two of her family members on September 23. We understand the Rwandan authorities have until September 28 to press charges. In addition, we are also following the arrests of at least ten officials and members of an unregistered opposition party earlier this month. These cases suggest that tight restrictions remain on political competition and critics of the ruling party.

Other serious human rights violations we have cited in our reports to Congress include arbitrary or unlawful killings; security forces' disregard for the rule of law; restrictions on civil society organizations; and government interference with the press. Over the years, Rwandans have reported to us the disappearance and suspected deaths of family members at the hands of Rwandan security services. NGOs critical of the government are routinely denied registration to operate in the country. Government officials have also questioned, threatened, and arrested journalists who expressed critical views on sensitive topics. The government has used laws criminalizing genocide ideology and divisionism, along with national security provisions, to suppress dissent, prosecute journalists, and pressure human rights groups to refrain from investigating and reporting on their findings.

The Administration continues to take action to address the human rights situation in Rwanda:

- In March 2017, our Ambassador in Kigali initiated a quarterly high-level dialogue with the government on civil society and media freedom issues.

- USAID supports a number of targeted activities to promote the rule of law, access to justice, and the responsible growth of civil society and the media.
- Some areas where we continue to work include strengthening local NGO capacity to engage in policy making, improvements to laws governing NGOs, increasing the capacity and skills of the media to provide independent and impartial information, and skills training for judges.
- Rwanda benefits from the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), and we have raised concerns to the Rwandan government regarding harassment of political opposition leaders and NGOs as well as restrictions on media freedom within the context of AGOA's eligibility criteria.
- We are responding to Rwanda's request for help to combat trafficking in persons, including by improving prosecutorial skills and closing gaps in investigative capacity.
- Over the last decade we have worked closely with the Rwandan government, civil society, and the private sector to combat child labor. Thanks to our partnership, approximately 5,000 children were removed from child labor in Rwanda's tea-growing districts between 2015 and 2017 alone.

I would also like to note some good news with respect to human rights and governance in Rwanda. The Government of Rwanda holds public officials accountable for corrupt practices, including through prosecution. Rwanda has also prioritized the fight against gender-based violence and generally respects the rights of LGBTI persons. Women leaders are promoted, as evidenced by the fact that 63 percent of Parliament members and 40 percent of cabinet officials are female.

Human rights are part and parcel of our ongoing dialogue at all levels of the Rwandan government. Our consistent message remains that allowing opposition figures, journalists, and civil society to contribute to Rwanda's future is crucial to building the knowledge-based economy the government seeks to foster. This includes ensuring freedom of expression, press freedoms, and the ability of citizens to criticize the government and ruling party without fear of threats, violence, or intimidation.

From private engagement to public statements, we have raised and will continue to raise these issues – not just because it is the right thing to do, but because we firmly believe that Rwanda's ability to sustain the gains achieved over the last 23 years depends on building an inclusive society that protects the rights of all of its citizens.

The government and people of Rwanda have reasons to be hopeful as the country continues to build a brighter future linked to peace and economic development. The United States will continue to work in partnership with all Rwandans to support progress in security and development, and to strengthen transparent democratic institutions that welcome criticism and embrace diverse views.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.