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(Author)

World Report 2024 - Rwanda

Commentators, journalists, opposition activists, and others speaking out on current affairs and criticizing public policies in **Rwanda** continued to face abusive prosecutions, enforced disappearances, and have at times died under unexplained circumstances. In January, journalist John Williams Ntwali [died in suspicious circumstances](#). The authorities said he died in a road accident, but they provided no evidence of such an accident and held a [hasty trial, essentially behind closed doors](#), leaving many questions unanswered.

The **Rwandan** army [deployed](#) troops to eastern Democratic Republic of Congo to provide direct military support to the M23 armed group, helping it [expand its control](#) over Rutshuru and neighboring Masisi territories. The **Rwanda**-backed M23 rebels have committed unlawful killings, rapes, and other apparent war crimes since late 2022. Attacks with explosive weapons in populated areas of North Kivu province killed and injured civilians, damaged infrastructure, and exacerbated a catastrophic humanitarian crisis.

Security forces in **Rwanda** continued to “clear up” the streets of Kigali and detain people deemed “undesirable”—such as street children, street vendors, sex workers, homeless people, and beggars—ahead of high-profile visits and events. People are taken to an [unofficial detention facility](#), Gikondo transit center, under the aegis of the National Rehabilitation Service. Human Rights Watch received information confirming severe ill-treatment and appalling detention conditions at Gikondo transit center, as well as torture in official prisons in **Rwanda**, throughout the year.

Political Space

The **Rwanda** Patriotic Front (RPF) and its proxies have deployed a range of measures across the globe to silence and target real or suspected opponents. As **Rwanda** approaches its 2024 general elections, space for political opposition remains closed, both inside and outside the ruling party. Senior RPF officials condemned the organization of a traditional clan meeting by a group of influential leaders planning to appoint a chief, denouncing the gathering as an "interference in the unity of **Rwandans**." According to [media reports](#), after the event on July 9, senior party officials who attended the ceremony were temporarily detained and questioned after pictures and videos of them dancing at the venue were circulated.

There are over a dozen political opposition members in prison. On December 16, 2022, the High Court's Rwamagana chamber sentenced Théophile Ntirutwa, a member of the unregistered Dalfa-Umurinzi opposition party, to seven years in prison for "spreading false information or harmful propaganda with intent to cause a hostile international opinion against [the] **Rwandan** Government." This criminal offense is incompatible with **Rwanda's** regional and international human rights obligations, particularly regarding free speech.

The [trial of 10 people](#) related to "Ingabire Day," an event scheduled for October 14, 2021, and organized by the Dalfa-Umurinzi to discuss, among other things, political repression in **Rwanda**, continued throughout 2023. At time of writing, eight party members were jailed in Kigali's Nyarugenge (Mageragere) prison and one was in hiding. Théoneste Nsengimana, a journalist who was planning to cover the event and is on trial with the group, is also jailed at the same prison. Human Rights Watch received credible information from former prisoners about torture and ill-treatment in **Rwanda** prisons, including Nyarugenge prison, where some have said they are being held in isolation and beaten.

Christopher Kayumba, the former editor of *The Chronicles* newspaper, who was [arrested](#) in 2021 shortly after establishing a new political party, the Rwandese Platform for Democracy (RPD), was [released](#) in February. He was acquitted of rape and "sexual misconduct" charges. In November, Kayumba [was convicted on appeal](#) and handed a two-year suspended sentence.

In March, the 25-year sentence of Paul Rusesabagina, a high-profile critic and United States resident, was [commuted](#) by presidential order. Rusesabagina's enforced disappearance in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, his illegal transfer to **Rwanda**, and the serious fair trial rights violations—including the interception of privileged communications between Rusesabagina and his lawyers—highlighted the **Rwandan** government's willingness and ability to target dissidents across its borders.

Freedom of Expression

At time of writing, several journalists and commentators were behind bars in **Rwanda**. In some cases, they were **arrested** for speaking out about security force abuses, including unlawful and arbitrary detention, torture, and extrajudicial killings, or for **criticizing** the ruling RPF and its human rights record.

The trial of blogger and commentator Aimable Karasira continued, on charges of genocide denial and justification and of divisionism. He has spoken about losing family members to both Hutu extremists and the RPF during and after the 1994 genocide. Judges ordered a medical examination into Karasira's mental health, which concluded that he suffers from "depression." Karasira and his defense lawyers accused **Rwandan** prison authorities of intercepting their communications and denying him access to adequate medical care and his medication, and they requested an independent examination by an international medical team.

In March, an additional 2 years were added to the 15-year sentence of Yvonne Idamange, a Tutsi online commentator and genocide survivor who criticized the Covid-19 lockdown and government-organized genocide commemorations. Her trial was held behind closed doors at the High Court's Special Chamber for International Crimes and Cross-border Crimes, after the prosecution argued she posed a risk to public order.

YouTube journalist **Dieudonné Niyonsenga**, alias "Cyuma Hassan"—who was sentenced to seven years in 2021, after reporting on the impact of the Covid-19 guidelines on vulnerable populations—remained in jail. Human Rights Watch received information indicating he is being subjected to ill-treatment and held in appalling conditions.

On January 19, **Rwanda** police **reported** that journalist John Williams Ntwali died in a road accident in Kimihurura, Kigali, on January 18 at 2:50 a.m. and that the driver of the car involved in the collision had been arrested. In the weeks that followed, **Rwandan** authorities failed to provide the exact location of the alleged accident, any photo or video evidence, or detailed information on others involved. A **hasty trial was held** in the absence of independent observers, including journalists, and the driver was convicted of manslaughter and unintentional bodily harm. Ntwali had told several people, including Human Rights Watch researchers, that he was being threatened.

Refugee Rights

Rwanda's support to the M23 armed group in eastern Congo has contributed to the **displacement of over 1 million Congolese people**. In January, the **Rwandan** president openly **politicized refugee rights** by threatening not to host Congolese refugees.

On June 29, the United Kingdom Court of Appeal [ruled the UK-Rwanda Asylum Partnership Arrangement—under which the UK plans to expel to Rwanda asylum seekers who arrive irregularly in the UK—unlawful](#), concluding there is a real risk that asylum seekers sent to Rwanda would be returned to their home countries, where they face risk of persecution or other ill-treatment. The UK government appealed the ruling, and the UK Supreme Court found that the deal was unlawful in November, highlighting Rwanda's poor human rights record and serious defects in its asylum system.

Rwanda continued to target Rwandans around the world, including asylum seekers and refugees, to silence critics and stave off political opposition abroad. The abuse, extensively documented by Human Rights Watch in an [October 2023 report](#), has led to Rwandans practicing self-censorship and living in fear of attacks, including in the UK.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Rwanda is one of the few countries in East Africa that [does not criminalize](#) consensual same-sex relations, and the government's policies are generally seen as progressive. However, in practice, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people have faced stigma because of their sexual orientation and gender identity.

International Justice

Efforts to hold accountable those responsible for the 1994 genocide in Rwanda continued. In May, a major genocide suspect, Fulgence Kayishema, was [arrested](#) in South Africa, after evading justice since 2001. He is alleged to have planned the killings of more than 2,000 men, women, and children on April 15, 1994, at a church in western Rwanda.

In June, a United Nations tribunal in the Hague [suspended](#) the trial of Félicien Kabuga for crimes committed during the [1994 Rwandan genocide](#). He is accused of playing a central role in planning, ordering, and carrying out the genocide. According to [media reports](#), judges said Kabuga, now 90, was "unfit to participate meaningfully in his trial and is very unlikely to regain fitness in the future."

Key International Actors

After the UN Group of Experts on Congo named in June several senior Rwandan army commanders responsible for the Rwanda Defence Force's (RDF) support to the M23 armed group, the European Union in July [imposed targeted financial and travel sanctions](#) against nine individuals for "acts that constitute serious human rights violations and abuses" in eastern Congo, including Capt. Jean-Pierre Niragire, known as

Gasasira, of the RDF. Earlier that month, the EU said it "firmly condemns Rwanda's support to M23 and Rwanda's military presence in Eastern DRC" and urged Rwanda to withdraw its troops.

In August, the US government imposed [financial and property sanctions](#) on [six individuals](#), including senior Rwandan military commander Brig. Gen. Andrew Nyamvumba, for their roles in backing abusive armed groups in the conflict in eastern Congo.

The EU did not publicly speak out against human rights violations committed against activists, journalists, and other critics within the country.

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