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Rwanda: Stop Intimidating Regional Human Rights Group

The Rwandan authorities should immediately stop intimidating human rights defenders and allow them to work freely, Human Rights Watch said today. Two leading members of a regional human rights organization were unlawfully detained on August 19, 2011, prevented from traveling, questioned, and harassed, Human Rights Watch said.

Joseph Sanane and Epimack Kwokwo, the president and acting executive secretary of the Regional Human Rights League in the Great Lakes Region (*Ligue des droits de la personne dans la région des Grands Lacs*, LDGL), were stopped by border officials on August 19. They had been traveling to Burundi for a management committee meeting to prepare for the group's annual general meeting. Both were detained and taken to the capital, Kigali, for questioning. Kwokwo was released the same evening. Sanane was detained overnight and released the following day.

"These measures are clearly designed to obstruct the LDGL's activities, intimidate its leadership, and weaken the organization," said [Daniel Bekele](#), Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "Such behavior against human rights defenders, and an organization that engages in legitimate activity, belies the authorities' claims that they respect human rights."

Sanane had been traveling to Burundi from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), while Kwokwo had been traveling from Kigali. Both men are Congolese nationals.

The LDGL is one of the few remaining independent human rights organizations in Rwanda – a country where reporting on human rights abuses invariably results in hostile reactions by the government. In 2010, Pascal Nyilibakwe, the group's executive secretary, left Rwanda after repeated threats to his safety.

The LDGL, which has its headquarters in Kigali, is a coalition of Rwandan, Burundian, and Congolese human rights groups. Other staff and board members of the group and its member organizations – particularly the Rwandan League for the Promotion and Defence of Human Rights (*Ligue pour la promotion et la défense des droits de l'homme*, LIPRODHOR) – have been repeatedly threatened over the last 10 years. Several have also had to leave Rwanda for their safety.

Rwandan immigration officials stopped Kwokwo at Akanyaru, near the border with Burundi, in the late morning of August 19. They allowed two colleagues traveling with him to continue. After confirming Kwokwo's identity, the immigration officials called the police. They said they had orders from the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) in Kigali not to let him cross but did not provide a reason. Kwokwo was detained in a cell alone for several hours.

When the police arrived, they asked him what he had done and said they did not know why he had been arrested. Police officers from the nearby town of Huye similarly told Kwokwo that they were unaware of the reason for his arrest. Eventually the police drove him to the CID headquarters in Kigali, where he was released at around 9 p.m. and told to return the next day. The police kept his laptop computer, mobile phone, work documents, and diary.

Kwokwo returned, as ordered, on the morning of August 20. He was questioned about the internal administration and finances of the LDGL and accused of helping Nyilibakwe leave the

country. They asked a series of questions about Nyilibakwe, including the reasons for his departure and when he was expected to return. They told Kwokwo to return on August 22.

Sanane, who was traveling through Rwanda on his way to Burundi, was stopped at Bugarama, on the Rwandan side of the border. He was taken to the local police station and detained in a cell overnight. The following morning, he was handcuffed and transferred to the CID in Kigali.

He was also questioned about the group's financial affairs. The police accused him of misappropriating funds and helping Nyilibakwe to leave the country, allegedly with false documents. Sanane denied the allegations. The police asked Sanane whether he was involved in politics and alleged that complaints had been made about him speaking out abroad against the Rwandan government. He was released at around 7 p.m. and told to return two days later, with Kwokwo, for further questions. The police kept his laptop computer.

When the two men returned on August 22, the police went through their computers, apparently searching for documents relating to the meeting in Burundi. The police told the two men they did not find anything. They allowed Kwokwo and Sanane to retrieve all their belongings except Kwokwo's money. The police said they would only return Kwokwo's money once he or Sanane had provided documents relating to the LDGL's financial situation, which they ordered them to do on August 23.

Although the police verbally accused both men of wrongdoing of various types, neither Sanane nor Kwokwo has been charged with any criminal offense.

"The Rwandan authorities should stop harassing human rights activists and allow them to continue their activities without obstruction – including traveling outside Rwanda for legitimate purposes," Bekele said. "Unless there is credible evidence that they have participated in criminal activities, the police should end these arbitrary detentions and interrogations."

Human Rights Watch has documented a longstanding pattern of intimidation and harassment of human rights defenders by Rwandan officials, including threats to their security, administrative obstacles, public and personalized attacks, and allegations that they are complicit with political opponents. Several human rights organizations, once active in Rwanda, have also been silenced through infiltration by people close to the government who have taken over these groups' leadership.

In 2010, the LDGL was singled out for criticism after it published a report on the presidential elections. It was also criticized for its role, along with other organizations, in preparing a joint civil society statement on the human rights situation in Rwanda submitted to the United Nations Human Rights Council in advance of Rwanda's Universal Periodic Review.

Other real or suspected critics of the government, particularly journalists, have also been victims of politically motivated arrests and other attacks. In June 2010, the independent journalist Jean-Léonard Rugambage was assassinated in Kigali, just two months after his newspaper, *Umuwugizi*, and another newspaper critical of the government, *Umuseso*, were suspended by the government-affiliated Media High Council.

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