



Document #2107972

Amnesty International (Author)

The State of the World's Human Rights; Rwanda 2023

UK courts found Rwanda's agreement to relocate asylum seekers from the UK to be unlawful. Restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression and association continued. Paul Rusesabagina was released from prison in March after a presidential pardon. Prison officials faced trial for alleged torture. Over 100 people died in floods and landslides; residents in high-risk zones faced relocation without compensation. The trial of alleged genocide financier Félicien Kabuga was suspended indefinitely. Genocide suspects were arrested, extradited or convicted by Rwandan courts and under universal jurisdiction.

Background

In its June report, the UN Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) reaffirmed the role of the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) in the eastern DRC conflict, including direct actions and through support to the M23 armed group (See DRC entry). Rwanda dismissed the report.

Two RDF officials, both of whom were named in the UN experts' report, were sanctioned by the EU and the USA, respectively.

In September, the USA listed Rwanda as complicit in the use or recruitment of child soldiers, in relation to Rwanda's backing of the M23.

While relations with the DRC continued to deteriorate, Rwanda's relationship with Burundi initially showed signs of improvement. However, relations soured again in December when Burundi's president accused Rwanda of supporting an armed group (see Burundi entry). Parliamentary elections were postponed to 2024 to harmonize with the presidential election schedule.

Refugees' and migrants' rights

In January, referring to refugees from the DRC, President Kagame said "we cannot keep being host to refugees for which, later on, we are held accountable in some way, or even abused about." Since late 2022, 13,643 refugees and asylum seekers had fled to Rwanda from fighting in eastern DRC.

Legal challenges continued in the UK against the deal to relocate asylum seekers from the UK to Rwanda (see UK entry). In June, the Court of Appeal ruled that the agreement was unlawful because Rwanda was unsafe for someone claiming asylum. This was on the grounds that deficiencies in Rwanda's asylum process carried a danger of people being returned to a home country where they are at risk of persecution or other ill-treatment. The UK home secretary lodged an appeal at the Supreme Court, which ruled in November to uphold the Court of Appeal's decision. In December, Rwanda and the UK signed a new treaty, and a bill on "the Safety of Rwanda" was introduced in the UK parliament.

Freedom of expression and association

John Williams Ntwali, an investigative journalist who reported on human rights-related issues, died in January in suspicious circumstances. The police said that he died in a road traffic accident in the capital Kigali on 18 January and they had arrested the driver involved in the collision. The day before his death, he had raised concerns with another journalist about his safety.¹ Despite the high level of interest in the case, the driver's trial was held in the absence of independent observers; he was convicted of manslaughter and unintentional bodily harm. The written verdict lacked significant details, including the precise location of the accident; made no reference to any visual evidence from traffic police said to have attended the accident; and references to a medical report were vague.²

Political opposition parties Development and Liberty for All (DALFA-Umurinzi) and the Rwandese Platform for Democracy (RPD) remained unregistered. Shortly after he established the RPD in 2021, journalist Christopher Kayumba was accused of rape for which he was acquitted in February 2023. In November, he was convicted and given a two-year sentence (suspended for one year), following an appeal by the prosecution.

Right to a fair trial

Paul Rusesabagina, who was convicted in 2021 on terrorism-related charges in a trial marred by numerous fair trial violations, was released from prison in March, following negotiations between the Rwandan and US governments. In 2022, he had written to President Kagame requesting a pardon and committing to stay out of Rwandan politics. In July, he

released a video describing Rwandans as "prisoners inside their own country".

Torture and other ill-treatment

Nine current and former officials of Rubavu prison, including the former director, were arrested in August, accused of torturing inmates. They remained in pretrial detention at the end of the year. This contrasted with the lack of action in response to previous complaints of torture and other ill-treatment.

Right to a healthy environment

At least 115 people were killed by flooding and landslides in western and northern Rwanda in May. In anticipation of heavier rains than usual towards the end of the year, authorities in the capital, Kigali renewed calls for 3,131 families living in zones at high risk of flooding and landslides to relocate before the rainy season (normally September to November). In August, Kigali's mayor advised that support would not be available to residents – a policy which, if implemented, would violate their right to housing. However, residents deemed to be too vulnerable to relocate might be compensated.

In June, the government launched the Revised Green Growth and Climate Resilience Strategy in support of Rwanda's aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 38% by 2030. Its stated objectives include achieving energy security and low carbon supply; sustainable land use and water resource management; and social protection to reduce vulnerability to climate change impacts. The strategy would require USD 2 billion annually to implement, with USD 700 million to be provided from government budgets, and additional financing from sources including climate funds, the private sector and development partners.

Right to truth, justice and reparation

In August, appeal judges at the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT) ordered that the trial of 90-year-old alleged chief genocide financier Félicien Kabuga be suspended indefinitely. In June, the court had ruled that he was unfit to stand trial because of ill health, but had proposed an "alternative finding procedure" that was rejected on appeal.

Genocide suspect Fulgence Kayishema was arrested in South Africa in May and faced 54 charges of violating domestic law. He was re-arrested in August on a new arrest warrant that would allow his extradition to the IRMCT in Tanzania.

Genocide suspect Théoneste Niyongira was deported from Malawi to Rwanda in June.

In February, Rwanda's High Court Chamber for International Crimes sentenced Jean Twagiramungu to 25 years' imprisonment on genocide charges. He had been extradited from Germany in 2017. In March, the Rwanda Court of Appeals upheld Ladislas Ntaganzwa's life sentence following his conviction on genocide charges in 2020.

In September, genocide convict Sylvestre Gacumbitsi died in Mali while serving a 30-year sentence handed down by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. Aloys Simba, who had been granted early release by the IRMCT, died in Benin in July.

There was progress on several genocide cases held in Europe under the principle of universal jurisdiction. In June, the Paris Assize Court found Philippe Hategekimana, a former military policeman, guilty of genocide and crimes against humanity and sentenced him to life imprisonment. Pierre Kayondo, former prefect of Kibuye, was arrested in September in France and charged with complicity in genocide and crimes against humanity. Pierre-Claver Karangwa was arrested in the Netherlands in October. In June, the supreme court in the Netherlands had refused his extradition to Rwanda due to fair trial concerns. In Belgium, Seraphin Twahirwa and Pierre Basabose were found guilty of genocide and war crimes in December. Also in December, a Paris court found Sosthène Munyemana guilty on genocide charges and sentenced him to 24 years in prison.

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1. ["Rwandan authorities should ensure an independent investigation into John Williams Ntwali's death", 31 January](#)
 2. ["Rwanda: Questionable trial after journalist's death", 15 March](#)

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ecoi.net description:

Report on the human rights situation (covering 2023)

Country:
Rwanda

Source:
[Amnesty International](#) (Author)

Published:

24 April 2024

Original link:<https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/africa/east-africa-the-horn-and-great-lakes/rwanda/report-rwanda/>**Document type:**

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Available on ecoi.net since:

24 April 2024

Document ID:

2107972

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