

Update: Secretary of State Blinken to visit Rwanda and DRC

On July 29th, 2022, Secretary of State Blinken announced that he will be traveling to the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda from August 9-11. This is followed by the letter that Chairman Menendez (D-NJ) sent asking for Blinken to take action against Rwanda considering their continued supply of lethal military equipment to the M23 rebels and the unlawful detention of Paul Rusesabagina. It is crucial during Secretary Blinken’s time in the region, that he tells Rwandan officials that Rwanda needs to respect the DRC’s sovereign territory and stop the looting of coltan, gold, diamonds, and other critical strategic minerals.

<https://www.state.gov/east-asian-and-pacific-affairs-assistant-secretary-daniel-j-kritenbrink-and-african-affairs-assistant-secretary-molly-phae-on-the-secretarys-upcoming-travel-to-cambodia-the-philippines-sou/>

“In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Secretary will meet with senior government officials as well as members of civil society to discuss efforts to hold peaceful, on-time free and fair elections in 2023. He will want to hear the Congolese perspective about regional efforts to address the role of armed groups in eastern Congo and the recent spike in violence, including attacks against MONUSCO peacekeepers.

In both the DRC and Rwanda, the Secretary will highlight the need for respect for territorial integrity and explore how the United States can support efforts to reduce tensions. In Kigali, he looks forward to the opportunity to meet President Kagame for the first time since he became Secretary of State to discuss a range of national and regional issues. He will raise the case of Paul Rusesabagina, whom the Secretary has determined has been wrongfully detained.”

Sincerely,
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United States Senate
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6225

July 20, 2022

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

I write with concern about the Rwandan government's continuing disregard for democratic and human rights, and the need for a more effective U.S. policy.

President Kagame's efforts to silence journalists, human rights activists, and opposition voices inside Rwanda are well known. After changing the Rwandan constitution in 2015 to eliminate presidential term limits so as to remain in office in perpetuity, Kagame won re-election in 2017 with an implausible 99% of the vote. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), "Kagame's landslide win came as no surprise in a context in which Rwandans who have dared raise their voices or challenge the status quo have been arrested, forcibly disappeared, or killed, independent media have been muzzled, and intimidation has silenced groups working on civil rights or free speech." HRW has also noted that since 2019 alone as many as 32 journalists, internet commentators, and opposition activists in Rwanda have either been killed, disappeared, or jailed.

The Rwandan government is also credibly accused of targeting dissidents living outside Rwanda. Outspoken critics of Kagame have been assassinated in South Africa, Mozambique, Uganda, and Kenya. In July, another Rwandan dissident was gunned down by unknown assailants in Mozambique. The South African government as well as law enforcement agencies in both the United Kingdom and Belgium have warned that Kagame was targeting Rwandan dissidents in their countries. Both South Africa and Sweden have expelled Rwandan diplomats for espionage activities against Rwandan dissidents living in exile.

Several worrisome new reports bring into even greater focus the extent of Kagame's efforts to target critics not only in Europe and Africa but also in the United States. In March, the Canadian organization Citizen Lab identified Rwanda as one of the countries around the world responsible for conducting transnational repression. "For the Rwandan diaspora," wrote Citizen Lab, "the Rwandan regime's assassinations, physical harassment, and forcible renditions of nationals outside its borders have been combined with digital threats, such as the use of spyware and online harassment." In June, Freedom House also identified Rwanda as one of the most prolific transnational repression actors worldwide, alongside Russia, China, Iran, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, and noted that in 2022 the FBI issued a bulletin highlighting how Rwanda, along with Iran and Saudi Arabia, was engaged in "transnational repression in the United States."

Paul Rusesabagina, a U.S. lawful permanent resident, was among those targeted by Rwanda while living in the United States. As you know, he was lured onto a charter flight while abroad and flown to Rwanda without his knowledge as part of a Rwandan operation which Kagame later described to the New York Times as “flawless.”

I was pleased to hear the Department of State confirm in May that Mr. Rusesabagina is now classified by the Administration as wrongfully detained. However, at the same time as the State Department in Washington confirmed this designation related to Mr. Rusesabagina’s status, the U.S. Embassy in Rwanda tweeted a photo of the Commander of U.S. Africa Command and the U.S. Chargé d’Affaires in Kigali with Kagame and top Rwandan military officials. This contradiction is deeply problematic and emblematic of a policy toward Rwanda that is increasingly out of step with U.S. interests and values.

The United States allocated more than \$147 million in foreign assistance to Rwanda in 2021, and has proposed \$145 million in FY2023, making the U.S. Rwanda’s largest bilateral donor. In addition, the Rwandan military receives U.S. capacity-building assistance and training. In recent months, the Administration has taken action against other governments responsible for targeting dissidents abroad. In March, the State Department imposed visa restrictions on Chinese officials “for their involvement in repressive acts against members of ethnic and religious minority groups and religious and spiritual practitioners inside and outside of China’s borders, including within the United States.” And in February, the Department imposed visa restrictions on Belarusian nationals under the “Khashoggi Ban,” which was enacted in 2021 to prevent and respond to acts of transnational repression by any government targeting journalists, activists, or dissidents for abuse. Not only would Rwanda be flouting U.S. laws by targeting dissidents inside the United States, but Rwanda also appears to be the only foreign government in the world that is both wrongfully detaining an American resident and seen by the United States as a partner and ally. I request an explanation on what the Department is doing to address Rwanda’s actions targeting dissidents and individual’s resident in the United States and elsewhere.

Rwanda is also once again engaged in destabilizing actions regionally in Central Africa. A week after the photo-op with senior U.S. officials, the Rwandan military was credibly accused of supporting M23 rebels in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and of deploying Rwandan soldiers across the border into DRC. As you recall, in the late 1990s Rwanda and Uganda invaded DRC, triggering a regional war that according to the International Rescue Committee resulted in as many as 5.4 million deaths from 1998 to 2007 due conflict and resulting humanitarian crisis. In 2012, Rwanda again sought to undermine DRC by supporting M23 rebels who captured the eastern DRC city of Goma, killing hundreds of civilians and displacing more than 100,000 people. Ten years later, in 2022, Rwanda has once again sent troops across the DRC border and reactivated M23 as a proxy militia now responsible for killing Congolese civilians, Congolese troops, and UN peacekeepers.

In light of these troubling issues, I urge you to undertake a comprehensive review of our policy toward Rwanda. Not only should such a review include a considered look at the levels and types of assistance we provide, but it should also identify actions that we should take to ensure the safety and security of U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents. I welcome the



July 19, 2022, Executive Order on Bolstering Ongoing Efforts to Bring Hostages and Wrongfully Detained U.S. Nationals Home. Since Mr. Rusesabagina is a lawful permanent resident, I ask you to clarify whether his case falls under this new E.O., and if the Department will add the new “D” indicator warning U.S. citizens of the risk of wrongful detention by a foreign government to the current Rwanda Travel Advisory.

Given Rwanda’s pattern of targeting American residents, the Department could elevate the Travel Advisory for Rwanda, which is currently at “Level 1: Exercise Normal Precautions,” to “Level 3: Reconsider Travel.” This would put the Department’s Travel Advisory for Rwanda on par with advisories for other governments responsible for wrongfully detaining U.S. residents and citizens. In response to Rwanda’s targeting of American residents in the United States and efforts to further destabilize neighboring DRC, the Administration could also consider sending any Rwandan military or government officials currently in the United States participating in the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program or other military assistance programs back to Rwanda.

Until such a review is undertaken and briefed to my staff, I plan to carefully review all assistance notified to Congress for Rwanda, and will place a hold on all security assistance, starting with several million dollars in support for Rwandan peacekeepers, as I am concerned that any U.S. support for the Rwandan military while it is deployed to DRC and is backing rebels responsible for attacking civilians, Congolese troops, and UN peacekeepers sends a troubling signal that the U.S. tacitly approves of such actions. The United States cannot support Rwandan contributions to peacekeeping in some parts of Africa while looking the other way as Rwanda foments rebellion and violence in other parts of the continent. I look forward to working with you to ensure U.S. policy reflects the values of the United States and of the Biden Administration.

Sincerely,

Robert Menendez
Chairman