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Rwanda: End human rights clampdown before presidential elections

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Amnesty International strongly condemns the diminishing space for freedom of expression in Rwanda as the country prepares for presidential elections in August 2010.

As part of a continued clampdown on human rights, Rwandan immigration today rejected a work visa re-application by the Rwanda-based researcher for the international human rights group, Human Rights Watch (HRW).

The de-facto expulsion of an international human rights worker from Rwanda is another indication of the worsening human rights situation in the country in the run-up to the elections. This latest incident is part of a pattern of repression, as the space for any kind of independent reporting and debate in Rwanda diminishes fast.

International human rights organisations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have recently been attacked in public speeches by senior government officials. The pro-government press has recently published several articles and opinion pieces attempting to discredit their work.

Recent months have seen a number of government measures against critics and opponents of the government including restrictions on freedom of expression and association. Amnesty International urges the Rwandan Government to respect freedom of expression and association, including by allowing space for human rights work.

On 21 April, presidential aspirant, Victoire Ingabire, President of the United Democratic Forces (FDU-Inkingi), a party seeking registration in Rwanda, was arrested, charged with “genocide ideology and minimising the genocide, divisionism and collaboration with a “terrorist” group”, and released the following day while proceedings continue.

In the trial against Ingabire, the prosecution would need to prove that what Ingabire said constitutes advocacy of hatred to demonstrate that she is not being punished for political dissent. They would also need to show that Ingabire herself committed a recognisable criminal act.

Last week, the High Media Council (HMC) suspended two Kinyarwanda newspapers until after the elections. The two newspapers, Umuseso and Umuvigizi, were suspended for six months. The HMC alleged that Umuseso had insulted the President and caused trouble in the army that could lead to insubordination.

Amnesty International strongly condemned harassment and intimidation of opposition groups, including the Green Party and the Ideal Social Party, in February 2010. Past Rwandan elections have been marred by intimidation and the ability of members of the political opposition to carry out their activities in accordance with their human rights has been restricted.

Background

Immigration authorities first cancelled the work visa of Human Rights Watch's Rwanda-based researcher, Carina Tertsakian, on 10 March. The authorities alleged discrepancies in her documents, relating to signatures of her employer which they claimed were inconsistent. They also cited an error in the date on the contract mistakenly dated October 2010, rather than 2009.

Rwanda's Criminal Investigation Department (CID) summoned Carina Tertsakian twice in March to respond to allegations of using false documents. She submitted a second visa application on 16 March with additional letters from the Human Rights Watch headquarters notarised to certify their authenticity.

Today the Immigration Authorities informed Carina Tertsakian that they were not satisfied with the explanations Human Rights Watch had submitted. They refused to provide a response in writing and reminded Tertsakian that as a British national she has 90 days to stay in the country. The 90 day period expires tomorrow.

The latest developments coincide with the deadline for all international NGOs based in Rwanda, including Human Rights Watch, to apply for renewal of their registration certificate. The original 31 March deadline was extended to 30 April.

The Rwandan Government has a history of clamping down on human rights work in advance of elections. In September 2008, the late Alison Des Forges, Human Rights Watch's Senior Advisor, was barred from entering Rwanda shortly before the Rwandan legislative elections. She was again refused entry in December 2008.

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