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Lenin Ndebele

Rwanda's Paul Kagame is still targeting critics abroad, rights group claims

Правозахисна група стверджує, що Поль Кагаме з Руанди, як і раніше, переслідує критиків за кордоном

Президента Руанди Поля Кагаме звинувачують у використанні свого гарного міжнародного авторитету як прикриття для жорстоких зловживань, пильного спостереження та довільних арештів своїх громадян у діаспорі, котрі живуть у постійному страху перед критикою режиму. Про це йдеться в останній доповіді неурядової організації зі штаб-квартирою в США Human Rights Watch (HRW) під назвою «Приєднуйтесь до нас або помріть: екстериторіальні репресії в Руанді». Тирана Хассан, виконавчий директор HRW, сказала, що «руандійці за кордоном, навіть ті, хто живе за тисячі миль від Руанди, наражаються на цензуру, утримуються від політичної активності і живуть у страху перед поїздками, нападами або тим, що їхні родичі в Руанді зазнають нападів». HRW відзначила позитивні результати правління П. Кагаме, такі як реалізація комплексного плану розвитку та покращення репутації Руанди за кордоном. «Ці успіхи не супроводжуються прогресом у галузі цивільних та політичних прав. Уряд оголосив створення «ворожої міжнародної думки» про руандійський уряд кримінальним злочином і використовує його для переслідування та залякування критиків та журналістів усередині Руанди», - заявили в HRW.

<https://www.news24.com/news24/africa/news/rwandas-paul-kagame-is-still-targeting-critics-abroad-rights-group-claims-20231010>

Human Rights Watch (HRW) says Rwandans abroad are scared of criticising Paul Kagame because they are being monitored.

According to the rights group, Kagame was taking advantage of his international standing to hide abuses.

The Rwandan government says HRW is doggedly focused on distorting the reality of Rwanda. Rwanda's president, Paul Kagame, is accused of using his good international standing as a cover for brutal abuse, close monitoring, and arbitrary arrests of his nationals in the diaspora who live in constant fear of criticising the regime.

This is according to the latest report by Human Rights Watch (HRW) titled " 'Join Us or Die': Rwanda's Extraterritorial Repression."

Tirana Hassan, HRW's executive director, said self-censorship, shying away from commenting on politics, and just not traveling back home were some of the methods Rwandans had resorted to, attempting to avoid the government's wrath.

"Rwandans abroad, even those living thousands of miles away from Rwanda, censor themselves, refrain from political activism, and live in fear of traveling, being attacked, or seeing their relatives in Rwanda targeted," Hassan said.

While this was happening, she argued that Rwanda's international partners were looking the other way.

"Rwanda's partners should open their eyes and see Kigali's wide-reaching effort for what it is: the consequence of three decades of impunity for the ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front," she added.

Kagame became president in 2000, having been part of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and credited with rebuilding a country that was almost finished by civil war in 1994.

He will seek re-election next year.

He has high hopes since he got 98.63% of the vote in 2017.

READ | After 29 years in charge, Rwanda's Paul Kagame says he will run for president again

HRW noted the good that has come out of Kagame's rule, such as implementing a comprehensive development plan and improving Rwanda's reputation abroad.

The government has tried to promote investments, tourism, and high-profile events like the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in June 2022 and the inaugural Basketball Africa League competition in May 2021.

The HRW fears that the growing international reputation of a good country, that Rwanda was getting such prominence at the United Nations, where it's a major contributor to the peacekeeping forces, and that multilateral institutions were hiding the bad side of the regime.

"These gains have not been matched with progress on civil and political rights. The government has made creating a 'hostile international opinion' of the Rwandan government a criminal offence and uses it to prosecute and intimidate critics and journalists inside Rwanda," HRW said.

A Rwandan refugee living in Maputo, Mozambique, is worried about any wrong step he could take.

"I am afraid all the time. I am afraid when I see a car pull up behind me. I'm afraid when someone [comes to my workplace]. I am ready to be killed at any time now. I've refused to go back to Rwanda, so they will kill me. There is nowhere to go. It's not safe here, but it's not safe anywhere," he said.

What makes it worse is that in Mozambique's oil-rich Cabo Delgado, the Rwandan Defence Forces (RDF) are heroes.

They have managed to contain Islamic extremist insurgents, and they enjoy the ear of the Mozambican government.

HRW said several exiles, including genocide survivors, claimed they had experienced internet harassment for speaking out against the ruling party.

Some of the participants in the interviews claimed that, in some instances, their relatives were compelled to criticise them on pro-government YouTube channels.

Hassan said Rwanda was going to extraordinary measures to get its targets.

"The accounts of Rwandans abroad expose the extraordinary lengths to which Rwanda's government is willing to go, and the means at its disposal, to attack its opponents," she added.

Obsession

Yolande Makolo, the Rwandan government spokesperson, said HRW "is still doggedly focused on distorting the reality of Rwanda in yet another deceitful report."

She called HRW "shameless" for presenting a picture of Rwanda that only exists "in their imagination."

She added that Rwanda had had a good run since the coming of the civil war. Any form of rating the country's human rights record should consider this aspect.

"Any balanced assessment of Rwanda's record in advancing the rights, well-being, and dignity of Rwandans over the past 29 years would recognise remarkable, transformational progress. Rwanda will not be deterred from this work by bad-faith actors advancing a politicised agenda," she said.