



human rights *first*

American ideals. Universal values.

June 23, 2015

The Honorable Sarah Sewall  
Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights  
United States Department of State  
2201 C St NW  
Washington, D.C. 20521

Dear Undersecretary Sewall:

We understand that you will lead the U.S. delegation to the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) conference in Kenya on June 24-28 as a regional follow up to the White House CVE Summit in February 2015. We urge you to use this opportunity to ensure that the commitments to implementing human rights protections that President Obama called for in February and that were included in the Summit outcomes document are included in the Action Agenda for CVE to be adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in September. In particular, we urge you to underscore the importance of the commitments to “strengthening independent civil society” and “building the capacity of independent human rights defenders to hold security forces accountable and to report impartially on the crimes and violations committed by violent extremists.”

At the Summit, President Obama noted that oppression and denial of human rights are counterproductive to combating violent extremism. We agree. We have participated in the follow-up process from the Summit seeking to ensure that protecting human rights becomes a central part of the CVE strategy adopted by the international community. U.S. leadership at regional meetings such as the one this week in Kenya will be essential to achieving this outcome.

Moreover, independent civil society organizations should be included fully in the deliberations at the regional meeting in Kenya—and any others to be held elsewhere, as well as at the United Nations General Assembly meeting in the fall—as part of the process of developing and ultimately implementing the multilateral strategy. Independent civil society organizations play an essential role in countering violent extremism, providing venues where peaceful counter-narratives to violent extremism can develop and bringing a degree of necessary accountability to the actions of security forces, thereby helping to prevent human rights violations.

Kenya’s recent response to the very real terrorist threats it faces has included attacks on legitimate peaceful dissent, which risks fomenting the extremism it is supposed to

1/2

75 Broad Street, 31st Floor  
New York, NY 10004

Tel: 212.845.5200  
Fax: 212.845.5299

[humanrightsfirst.org](http://humanrightsfirst.org)

805 15th Street, N.W., #900  
Washington, DC 20005

Tel: 202.547.5692  
Fax: 202.543.5999

1303 San Jacinto Street, 9th Floor  
at South Texas College of Law, Houston, TX 77002

Tel: 713.955.1360  
Fax: 713.955.1359

combat. The government has sought to clamp down on the legitimate activities of human rights organizations like Muhuri and Haki Africa, whose executive director attended the Summit, which criticized the government's policies and failure to uphold Kenya's international commitments.

The U.S. Ambassador to Kenya, Robert Godec, spoke in support of independent civil society in Kenya earlier this month and stressed its importance to the struggle against terrorism. Civil society "helps counter violent, extremist ideologies," he said. "Counterterrorism is most effective when governments involve local voices and communities, and civil society is a critical ally in this effort. As Kenya continues to face difficult security challenges, the government should partner with civil society to find solutions." We welcome Ambassador Godec's comments and urge you to elaborate on these points—which are applicable to many U.S. partners in Africa, several of which will be attending the Kenya conference—in your own statements in Kenya.

Underscoring the importance of human rights to countering violent extremism will also prepare the ground for President Obama to raise these issues during his visit to the country next month. Kenya is a key U.S. partner in the global struggle against terrorism and violent extremism, and it is essential that this partnership be grounded in respect for universal human rights standards, including protection for the legitimate activities of independent human rights organizations.

We look forward to continuing to participate in and contribute to the development of a multilateral strategy to counter violent extremism, and we appreciate the cooperation we have received from the State Department in following this important process.

Sincerely,

Elisa Massimino  
President and CEO

cc. The Honorable Tom Malinowski, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, U.S. Department of State

The Honorable Tina S. Kaidanow, Ambassador-at-Large and Coordinator for Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State

Mr. Stephen Pomper, Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights