



July 20, 2015

President Barack Obama

The White House

Dear President Obama:

I am writing to urge that you make protection of human rights a central feature of your upcoming visit to Kenya. As you highlight the promise of economic development and entrepreneurship, we hope you will underscore the wisdom of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—that respect for human dignity is the foundation of peace, security, and freedom. Without it, no nation can flourish.

Countering Violent Extremism

Kenya is an important partner in the global struggle against violent extremism, and it faces very real terrorist threats. But its recent response to them has included attacks on peaceful dissent. For example, in the name of fighting terrorism, the Kenyan government has sought to clamp down on the legitimate activities of human rights organizations, like Muhuri and Haki Africa, which have criticized government policy and human rights abuses by Kenyan security forces.

Under Secretary of State Sarah Sewall and U.S. Ambassador Robert Godec each made strong statements recently in Kenya about the need to protect independent civil society and involve its leaders in discussions and decisions about countering extremism. We urge you to amplify those statements during your visit and meet with representatives of independent human rights organizations, including those, like Muhuri and Haki Africa, which have been the target of official pressure in recent months.

It will be important to make clear to Kenyan leaders that violating human rights and suppressing legitimate dissent risk fomenting the very extremism that—through participation in multilateral efforts and in partnership with the United States—they have committed to combat. You made this point very powerfully in your remarks in February at the CVE Summit in Washington. Conditions in Kenya today warrant your underscoring that message during your visit.

Protection of Vulnerable Communities

You have rightly noted that oppression and denial of human rights feed violent extremism. Kenya's 2010 Constitution holds the promise of equal protection under the law for members of Kenya's diverse communities. We hope you will urge the Kenyan government to realize this promise by ensuring that institutions designed to protect human rights and prevent violations—including the Kenyan National Commission on Human Rights and the Independent Policing Oversight Authority—are strong and independent.

In addition, we hope you will speak out against discrimination and incitement to violence against vulnerable communities in Kenya. The collective blame of Kenya's Muslim community for the crimes of violent extremists fuels resentment and undermines cooperation that Kenya needs in order to develop effective strategies to combat terrorist groups like al-Shabab.

Other vulnerable communities, including refugees and LGBT people, are in need of greater protection from the state. For example, news of your trip has generated a great deal of discussion on LGBT issues in Kenya. We urge you to engage in it candidly and constructively. Pointing to our own country's long and imperfect path to progress on this issue, and noting positive developments in the region such as the African Commission resolution in support of the rights of LGBT people, would be helpful ways of framing this message.

Since the terrorist attacks in April, Somali refugees have become increasingly vulnerable to abuses by Kenyan security forces. The government must ensure that refugees are protected and that efforts by the security forces to counter al-Shabab militants do not become broad brush collective punishment of the Somali community in Kenya. We urge you to press Kenyan leaders to ensure that all refugees who return to Somali do so voluntarily and to outline how the U.S. government will work with and support Kenyan authorities to make that option more attractive and sustainable to Somali refugees in Kenya.

Corruption

Kenya is plagued by endemic corruption which undermines the effectiveness of the security forces and erodes public trust in state institutions. In your 2006 visit to Kenya as a U.S. Senator, you spoke out eloquently about the need for Kenyan authorities to root out the scourge of corruption. Since then, the problem of corruption has only worsened, exacerbating tensions between the police and communities and increasing insecurity. We urge you to reiterate strongly the message that corruption undermines the effectiveness of security forces and erodes public trust in state institutions. You should also offer practical assistance to support Kenyan authorities in their anti-corruption efforts, including tracking down funds derived from corruption that are deposited in or transferred through U.S. banks and technical support from U.S. anti-corruption specialists.

A strong U.S. relationship with Kenya must be built on a shared commitment—in word and deed—to respect human rights. As our country continues to learn hard lessons from the grievous mistakes of its past, we urge you give these issues the prominence they deserve in your upcoming visit to Kenya.

Sincerely,

Elisa Massimino
President and CEO
Human Rights First