

July 14, 2015

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We welcome your decision to visit sub-Saharan Africa once again, and we applaud your support for African human rights defenders through your Stand with Civil Society initiative. The U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit held last year demonstrated your commitment to engage constructively with leaders on a number of key economic, political and security issues. Your upcoming trip to Ethiopia and Kenya offers another timely opportunity to demonstrate America's commitment to helping to build strong democratic institutions to benefit the continent's one billion citizens.

Ethiopia and Kenya face grave and worsening human rights challenges, and we trust those issues will be at the forefront of your discussions. The longstanding crackdown on human rights groups and journalists in Ethiopia and the use of so-called "anti-terror" laws to stifle the legitimate work of civil society actors in both Kenya and Ethiopia underscore their overall failure to adhere to democratic principles and international human rights standards.

For example, in April 2014, six Ethiopian bloggers and three journalists associated with the Zone 9 blogging collective were accused of "creating serious risk to the safety or health of the public" and arrested under the country's vague anti-terrorism law. While we welcome the recent release of five of those arrested, four remain behind bars today. Also, on April 7 of this year, two Kenyan human rights groups, Muslims for Human Rights (MUHURI) and Haki Africa -- with which many international human rights groups and donors have worked for many years -- were officially listed by the government as "Entities Suspected to be Associated with Al-Shabaab." As a result, their bank accounts remain frozen, and the NGO Coordination Board has commenced investigations into these two prominent groups, which may well lead to their deregistration. These recent examples illustrate a much broader and worrying trend in the region that affects the ability of civil society to freely operate without governmental intimidation or harassment.

We believe it imperative that you take the opportunity of your visits to meet publicly with pro-democracy and human rights activists, especially those at risk. By doing so, you would be affirming your solidarity with them, while demonstrating the concern we know you share regarding the troublesome developments described above. You would also call attention to the need to protect shrinking civic space in Kenya, Ethiopia, and the broader region, thereby sending a strong message that your administration remains committed to integrating human rights and good governance concerns into its official bilateral relations with all nations. Most importantly, meeting with activists will provide them with the necessary protection as they go about working on behalf of the same human rights issues the United States stands behind.

We would be pleased to work with you and your staff on arranging such a meeting during your upcoming trip, including helping to identify civil society groups and other key issues to address.

Thank you for your time and for your thoughtful consideration of these important issues.

Sincere regards,
Front Line Defenders (Global)
Open Society Foundations (Global)

Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights (Global)
World Movement for Democracy (Global)

Africa Center for Peace and Democracy (Africa Regional)
Africa Freedom of Information Center (Uganda)
American Jewish World Service (Global)
Atrocities Watch Africa (Africa Regional)
AU We Want Coalition (Africa Regional)
Bulawayo Agenda (Zimbabwe)
BudgIt (Nigeria)
Centre for Constitutional Governance (Nigeria)
Center for the Development of People (Malawi)
Citizens Center for Integrated Development and Social Rights (Nigeria)
Civil Society Associations Gambia
Coalition for Change (The Gambia)
Council on Global Equality (Global)
Counseling Services Unit (Zimbabwe)
East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (East Africa Regional)
FAHAMU-Networks for Social Justice (Africa Regional)
Federation of Women Lawyers (Kenya)
Freedom House (Global)
Gender Awareness Trust (Nigeria)
Grace to Heal (Zimbabwe)
Human Rights Foundation (Global)
Human Rights Watch (Global)
Independent Advocacy Project (Nigeria)
InformAction (Kenya)

Kenyan Section of the International Commission of Jurists (Kenya)
Media Initiative for Open Governance in Uganda (Uganda)
Muslims for Human Rights (Kenya)
National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders (Kenya)
National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders (Uganda)
New Initiative for Social Development (Nigeria)
Open Democracy Advice Center (Global)
OpenTheGovernment.org (Global)
PEN American Center (Global)
Pan African Lawyer's Union (Africa Regional)
Publish What You Pay (Global)
Sexual Minorities Uganda (Uganda)
Shalom Project (Zimbabwe)
State of the African Union (Africa Regional)
Strategic Empowerment & Mediation Agency (Nigeria)
Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (USA)
South Sudanese Network for Democracy and Elections (South Sudan)
Sudan Social Development Organization (Sudan)
Zimbabwe Human Rights Association (Zimbabwe)
Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum (Zimbabwe)