

Lawmakers urge release of 'Hotel Rwanda' hero charged with terrorism

National Journal Daily Extra AM

February 16, 2022 Wednesday

Copyright 2022 The National Journal Group, Inc. All Rights Reserved

Length: 1671 words

Byline: Cristina Maza

Body

To many, Paul Rusesabagina is a hero. The 67-year-old hotelier-turned-political-activist helped shelter over 1,000 people from death during the genocide in his country in the 1990s, inspiring the Oscar-nominated film **Hotel Rwanda**.

But back in Rwanda, the repressive government of President Paul Kagame claims that Rusesabagina is a terrorist. Kagame's regime abducted Rusesabagina, a Belgian citizen and permanent U.S. resident, and forced him back to the country in 2020. Rusesabagina boarded a plane he believed was taking him to Burundi, but instead landed in Kigali and was quickly arrested. Rwanda's justice minister later [said](#) publicly that the government paid for the jet. Rusesabagina has remained behind bars since.

Now, Rep. Joaquin Castro, who represents the Texas district where Rusesabagina lived, has introduced a resolution calling on the Rwandan government to free the San Antonio resident. Rusesabagina is a cancer survivor who suffers from a cardiovascular disorder, Castro says, and his health could deteriorate if he continues to be held in inhumane conditions in Rwanda.

We're trying to get him returned to the United States and to his family. I know the Kagame regime has claimed that he was funding terrorism and so forth. But there are problems with that. They never went through any proper channel to extradite him. They hoodwinked him and kidnapped him to take him to Rwanda rather than use legal extradition, Castro told **National Journal**. If your claim is legitimate, why would you need to kidnap someone to bring them back to the country?

The [resolution](#) Castro introduced calls for Rusesabagina to be released on humanitarian grounds and for the U.S. government to raise the case in all interactions with the Rwandan government.

Lawmakers urge release of 'Hotel Rwanda' hero charged with terrorism

Around 30 members, including House Foreign Affairs Committee Chair Gregory Meeks, have signed on to the resolution. Castro said he hopes the measure will go to the House floor for a vote in the next few weeks.

The accusations against Rusesabagina stem from his work as a vocal critic of Kagame's government and its alleged human-rights violations. Rusesabagina and his allies claim that Kagame has rigged elections, brutally cracked down on the government's opponents, and forbidden free speech in Rwanda.

Legal experts have questioned whether Rusesabagina received a fair trial in 2021. The American Bar Association's Center for Human Rights determined that the guilty verdict for terrorism-related offenses, after which Rusesabagina was sentenced to 25 years in prison, was unfair.

[*Freedom House has assessed*](#) that Rwanda is not a free country. Kagame's Rwandan Patriotic Front has ruled the country since it defeated the forces responsible for the genocide in 1994. By that time, members of the Hutu ethnic majority had killed around 800,000 members of the Tutsi minority.

In the nearly three decades since the RPF seized power, Rwanda has experienced economic growth and stability. But Freedom House says the RPF has suppressed dissent using surveillance, intimidation, rendition, and torture.

Rusesabagina's allies claim he has been subjected to all these methods of oppression. He and his family fled Rwanda for Belgium in 1996 and Belgium for the United States in 2009 because Rwandan government agents were constantly following them, his daughter, Anaïse Kanimba, said.

They persecuted my father. Our house was broken into two times in Brussels, Kanimba said.

Still, the intimidation didn't silence Rusesabagina or prevent him from becoming politically active. In 2018, he helped form a coalition called the Rwanda Movement for Democratic Change, which advocates for democracy in Rwanda. The National Liberation Front (FLN), an armed group formed by Rwandan refugees in the Congo, joined the coalition. This connection is what eventually led to the terrorism charges against Rusesabagina.

Rwanda's government blamed attacks on civilians in southwest Rwanda in 2018 and 2019 on the FLN and accused Rusesabagina of funding the group through his foundation and the RMDC.

Brian Endless, the director of African studies at Loyola University in Chicago who has worked as an adviser to Rusesabagina since 2007, [*argues*](#) that Rusesabagina never condoned violence. What's more, he says the Rwandan government never provided credible evidence that the FLN was responsible for the attacks. The group has denied its involvement.

Paul did say that he supports the FLN, but he wasn't supporting a group that had just committed a terrorist attack. He was supporting a group that was part of the umbrella political group he was part of, Endless said. That's something that was heavily misconstrued by the Rwandan government. Paul had no role in leading the FLN. He had no responsibility. He wasn't part of the FLN's party.

The Rwandan embassy in Washington did not respond to requests for comment.

Lawmakers urge release of 'Hotel Rwanda' hero charged with terrorism

One legal expert, who was only authorized to speak on background, described Rusesabagina's trial as a kangaroo court aimed at domestic audiences. Concerns were raised about whether Rusesabagina had access to a lawyer who was not tied to the Rwandan government and whether he may have been tortured prior to giving testimony. Experts say the prosecution failed to prove that Rusesabagina was behind the attacks, and chose instead to blame him for the attacks based on his affiliation with the FLN.

They hoodwinked him and kidnapped him to take him to Rwanda rather than use legal extradition. If your claim is legitimate, why would you need to kidnap someone to bring them back to the country?

Rep. Joaquin Castro

One of the witnesses in the trial, Michelle Martin, was also a paid agent of the Rwandan government who [registered under the Foreign Agents Registration Act](#) in 2013. Contacted by **National Journal**, Martin said an employee at Rusesabagina's foundation gave her access to his emails when she volunteered for the foundation in 2009 and 2010. The contents of those emails led her to contact U.S. law enforcement and later testify at Rusesabagina's trial in Rwanda, she said.

At some point [an employee at Rusesabagina's foundation] began to ask me to search for more politically-oriented emails requesting that I respond to those, and eventually the expectation was that I would monitor his emails, Martin wrote in an email. He was not completely proficient in English and relied on me to answer many of his emails. When I began to see emails I found disturbing, I started taking screen shots of them, and eventually made the decision to copy emails I found disturbing to pdf.

Martin claims that she was threatened by Rusesabagina's allies who accused her of spying for Rwanda. She denies that she was ever a spy and says her work for the government consisted only of academic research. Martin is now an associate professor of social work at California State University, Fullerton.

I have nothing to gain from my testimony other than doing what I believed was the right thing to do, Martin said. I have text messages and emails from [the foundation employee] to me detailing their activities recruiting youth from refugee camps in Uganda and university students in Rwanda, to create an internal uprising in Rwanda. It was these emails that prompted me to come forward, despite knowing the personal costs to me, my career, and my family.

Endless, who worked with Martin at the foundation, denies that Martin was granted access to any private correspondence.

Her testimony makes it sound like she had access to enormous amounts of information. She never had access to any foundation emails or other information, Endless said.

Rusesabagina's case is being appealed.

In Washington, Kanimba says she wonders if her father would have remained safe if he'd stayed out of politics. But she also said she believes he was targeted after the release of **Hotel Rwanda** in 2004.

Lawmakers urge release of 'Hotel Rwanda' hero charged with terrorism

I don't know if my father would have been quiet about what's happening in Rwanda, but it would have been different [if the movie hadn't been made], Kanimba said. One joke they tell in Rwanda is, 'Never dare to get an award outside of Rwanda.' My father received [*the Presidential Medal of Freedom*](#). That gave him a platform and elevated him.

Rusesabagina's family has mobilized since his abduction, reaching out to members of Congress like Castro and working with the State Department to secure the right to speak with him.

We're working with the State Department on his case. Unfortunately, it's a slow process with the State Department, Kanimba said. We're very grateful to have the support of the U.S. government. We've been able to have some people visit him to check that he is OK. We have a five-minute phone call with my father every week, which is a big privilege that most Rwandan prisoners don't get to have.

But my father has been imprisoned for 536 days after a sham trial, she added. He's been tortured. And Rwanda is a country that is a partner of the United States.

A State Department spokesperson, speaking on background, said the U.S. is engaging with the Rwandan government at high levels to address Rusesabagina's case.

The U.S. has continued to urge the government of Rwanda to address the shortcomings in the procedural protections in this case and establish safeguards to prevent similar issues in the future, the spokesperson said.

Kanimba says she believes the U.S. can use its influence to pressure Rwanda to release her father. If Washington can't convince a small country like Rwanda to release a political prisoner, then it can't expect to win freedom for people imprisoned by larger authoritarian powers like Russia or China, she said. Meanwhile, Castro noted that Rwanda is tarnishing its image in Washington by holding Rusesabagina prisoner.

I hope they will see a 67-year-old cancer survivor whose life for many years has been in the United States, in San Antonio, and make the decision to send him back, Castro said. This has certainly affected the perception of Rwanda and its government in the United States, and specifically in the United States Congress.

Load-Date: February 16, 2022