

# Opinion: Why the Biden administration should help the hero of ‘Hotel Rwanda’

Opinion by Tom Zoellner

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Sixteen years ago, President George W. Bush bestowed the nation’s highest civilian award — the Presidential Medal of Freedom — on hotel manager Paul Rusesabagina, who had shielded at least 1,268 people from near-certain death during the Rwandan genocide.

“This good man saved them by holding off the enemy with his commanding presence, his shrewd manner of negotiating, and his incredible calm amid the crisis and chaos,” Bush said at the ceremony to honor the hero of the subsequent film “Hotel Rwanda.”

But the White House, once so effusive, was virtually silent when Rusesabagina was taken prisoner by Rwandan government agents last August. And it has remained so during his subsequent trial in a sham court on charges of “terrorism” for which the Rwandan authorities have provided no real evidence. The court is set to issue its verdict on Aug. 20 — and is almost certain to convict him. The judiciary in Rwanda is a servant to the will of Rwandan President Paul Kagame, who has nursed animosity for years against Rusesabagina, whom he perceived as a rival to power. Given the charges against Rusesabagina, a guilty verdict could well lead to a life sentence.

Yet the Biden administration, which continues to regard Rwanda as an ally deserving of over \$100 million annually for the next five years, is reluctant to challenge the country openly. Its reasoning is that Kagame must be allowed to have a win in his own courts. But the time has come for a different phase of diplomacy: The United States should press for a humanitarian release of the man the United States once lauded and should not abandon now. Rusesabagina is now 67, a cancer survivor with high blood pressure, and his time in solitary confinement — illegal by global justice standards — has taken a grave physical toll.

Moreover, the dramatic accusations against him have proven empty, even in a fake trial. Prosecutors charged him with terrorism for supposedly funding the rebel group National Liberation Front (FLN) and sponsoring a raid on two villages that border Burundi. They promised documents and witnesses. But nothing credible materialized; only shadowy figures that Rusesabagina had never met and bank records of small and ordinary disbursements to friends and family back home.

“No witnesses to the alleged terrorist incidents, no identification of who did it, no linkage to Paul, nothing,” said Brian Endless, a political science professor at Loyola University Chicago who has been following the case. “And many witnesses provided evidence that exonerated Paul, especially between him and the FLN. The second half of the trial was marked by recantations of Paul’s co-accused, who withdrew their prior accusations saying they had no choice but to accuse him, after having been held in ‘inhumane conditions.’ ”

A variety of groups have condemned the kidnapping and sham trial, including [Human Rights Watch](#), the [Clooney Foundation for Justice](#), the [European Parliament](#), the [American Bar Association](#), [PEN America](#) and [41 members of Congress](#). The White House's contrasting absence from the list is nothing less than a scandal.

Lingering sympathy for Rwanda still runs through the State Department, where many still remember how the United States [failed to intervene](#) in the 1994 slaughter that claimed the lives of 800,000 people of both the Tutsi and Hutu ethnic groups. Kagame's Rwandan Patriotic Front army captured the capital of Kigali after 100 days and put an effective end to the killings, which gave him a global status akin to Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower marching into Nazi-controlled Germany.

But Rwanda's descent into a totalitarian state over the past quarter-century complicates the World War II analogy. Kagame maintains order through ruthless control of all levels of society, a giant "[spying machine](#)," in the words of exiled top official David Himbara, where informants are everywhere. Kagame's agents have assassinated many of his critics overseas, including former intelligence chief Patrick Karegeya in a Johannesburg hotel room in 2013. Rwanda was [an enthusiastic user](#) of Pegasus spy software, which it has used to listen in on phone conversations at home and abroad.

During the Rwandan genocide, Rusesabagina tried everything he could to let the world know about the killers outside the doors of his hotel. He even tried multiple times to call the White House but was dismissed by distracted staff members who did not comprehend the gravity of the situation.

The American presidency cannot now abandon him again. If Kagame succeeds in killing his most prominent global critic, who happens to be a U.S. permanent legal resident, it will open the door to increasing repression and atrocities against his own citizens. The Biden administration can make a clear statement against human rights abuses by our supposed allies by holding President Kagame to account by demanding that he release Rusesabagina.

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