



# Appeal Court orders journalist Rugurika's release

The Court of Appeal in the Burundian capital, Bujumbura, on 18 February, ordered the release on bail of the well-known journalist Bob Rugurika, according to Human Rights Watch.



Image via HRW

"The court's decision to release Bob Rugurika is excellent news - for Rugurika, for other Burundian journalists, and for media freedom in Burundi," said Daniel Bekele, Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "The Burundian authorities should now allow him and his radio station to continue their important work."

Rugurika, director of Radio publique africaine (RPA), one of Burundi's most popular radio stations, was arrested on January 20, 2015, after his station broadcast a series of investigative reports on the September 2014 murder of three Italian nuns in Burundi. The broadcasts included an interview with a man who claimed to have participated in the murders and alleged that senior intelligence and security officials were involved in planning them.

Rugurika was charged with conspiracy to murder, violating confidentiality in criminal investigations, harboring a criminal, and failing to uphold "public solidarity."

On February 4, the pretrial chamber of the high court in Bujumbura ruled that he should remain in detention until his trial. His lawyers appealed that decision, and the Court of Appeal ordered his release on bail. The delayed completion of administrative procedures means that he will probably only be released on February 19.

The Burundian government should ensure that journalists are not punished simply for broadcasting information on controversial or sensitive issues, Human Rights Watch said.

As news of the Appeal Court's decision broke, large crowds gathered outside RPA's building in Bujumbura, cheering and awaiting Rugurika's release.

Since Rugurika's arrest in January, there has been a huge public mobilisation campaign by Burundian journalists and independent groups. There also have been calls for his release by governments and organizations around the world - including representatives of the European Union, the Netherlands, and the UK, as well as the special rapporteur on human rights defenders of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. Others, including the US State Department and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, expressed concern about Rugurika's detention. On February 12, the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling for Rugurika's immediate and unconditional release.

Rugurika's arrest took place against a backdrop of an increasing crackdown on perceived government critics, in advance of elections scheduled to begin in May 2015. Independent journalists, activists, and members of opposition parties have been repeatedly intimidated, threatened, and prevented from carrying out their activities. Some have been detained and prosecuted.

In 2014, a leading human rights activist, Pierre Claver Mbonimpa, was arrested in connection with an interview he gave to RPA alleging that young Burundians were being armed and sent for military training in the Democratic Republic of Congo. He was charged with endangering internal and external state security. He was released in September on grounds of ill-health but is still awaiting trial.

"Rugurika has spent a month in prison - a month too long," Bekele said. "No journalists should be made to pay the price of free speech with their own freedom."

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