

May 14, 2015

Dear Ambassador Rice:

Thank you for your continued leadership in helping to protect human rights around the world. Under the Obama Administration, the United States has made considerable strides to promote the dignity of all people, regardless of their race, gender, sexual orientation, or gender identity.

As you are aware, the deteriorating situation in The Gambia has become increasingly dire for marginalized groups. President Yahya Jammeh, in power since 1994, has either imprisoned or disappeared an untold number of journalists, human rights defenders, opposition activists and leaders, as well as multiple Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender people. Last week, President Jammeh threatened at a political rally to “slit the throats” of men who wanted to marry other men in his country. This type of rhetoric from a sitting head of state is highly inflammatory and will incite violence in The Gambia. These remarks by President Jammeh provide license to those who would take the law into their own hands and contributes to an already severe epidemic of homophobia in the country. Last year, several suspected gay men were imprisoned -- one of them reportedly tortured so badly that he was hospitalized with internal bleeding -- after President Jammeh signed an amendment to The Gambia’s criminal code that established “aggravated homosexuality” as a new crime, which is punishable by life imprisonment. Just as important, President Jammeh’s rhetoric often comes with consequences. In August 2012, for instance, after a decades-long moratorium on the death penalty, President Jammeh publicly warned of upcoming mass executions. Several days later, nine death row inmates were secretly and arbitrarily executed, without due process, during one overnight session.

Last December, we welcomed the Obama Administration’s announcement that The Gambia’s eligibility for the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) was revoked due to these ongoing concerns and for a lack of progress on basic human rights benchmarks. It has become increasingly clear that stronger action is required. We therefore urge the Obama Administration to consider issuing visa bans on all top officials in the country who perpetrate, and who are complicit, in these human rights violations. Restricting their access to the United States would send an unequivocally strong message to leaders in The Gambia that the ongoing human rights abuses, combined with volatile rhetoric, are unacceptable. Similar sanctions imposed by the U.S. elsewhere in the region -- in Uganda for example -- have led to a decrease in the harshest rhetoric from targeted political leaders.

Similarly, given the involvement of the Gambian military and the National Intelligence Agency in committing these heinous abuses, we recommend that the U.S. initiate an immediate review of military and security assistance to the Gambian government.

We also urge the White House to issue a public statement in response to President Jammeh's most recent comments and voice concern about the series of forced disappearances and human rights violations that have been carried out by the government thus far in 2015. This statement should express concern for the safety and well being of all Gambian citizens and highlight the lack of respect for human rights that currently prevails in The Gambia. This decision would come at a critical time for two important reasons.

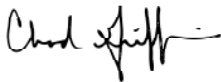
First, a statement from the White House will have a profound impact on the ground in The Gambia, as was the case with the U.S. government's statement last December, issued in the aftermath of President Jammeh signing the country's amended criminal code. A follow-on statement from the White House will continue to highlight the human rights crisis in The Gambia, as well as the increasingly volatile rhetoric espoused by its leaders. A strongly worded and timely statement will help advance human rights in the country by exposing these ongoing injustices to the world and by standing on the side of ordinary Gambians who continue to advocate for accountability and justice in the country.

Second, the U.S. government's silence on The Gambia's worsening human rights situation in 2015 has been manipulated by President Jammeh, and his government, to demonstrate that the United States somehow stands behind his heavy-handed response to the coup attempt. The ongoing prosecutions of Gambian-Americans in the U.S., those alleged to have participated in the December coup attempt, has undoubtedly contributed to this false narrative. Following the coup attempt on December 30, there has been a documented uptick of human rights abuses in the country, including widespread allegations of torture, as well as an increasing number of forced disappearances and illegal detentions, including the case of 13-year-old Yusupha Lowe, who has been imprisoned without charge since January.

As the human rights situation in The Gambia grows more dire, we strongly urge you to consider the steps we have recommended in order to protect the country's highly vulnerable and already marginalized groups, including LGBT people, who undoubtedly remain under serious threat.

Thank you very much for your attention to this pressing matter. We are willing and eager to work with you and your staff should you have any questions or additional follow up.

Sincere regards,



Chad Griffin
President, Human Rights Campaign



Kerry Kennedy
President, Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights

cc: Linda Thomas-Greenfield, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs