



List of Issues for Rwanda Prior to Reporting

United Nations Human Rights Committee

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I. Authors

The Wrongful Conviction International Law Task Force (WCILTF) is a global coalition of law professors, attorneys and activists working together to fill the “Innocence Gap” in international law. The WCILTF is supported by a pro bono legal team at the international law firm Proskauer Rose (www.proskauer.com/) located in New York City.

In the past twenty-five years, wrongful conviction of the innocent has emerged as a major problem in criminal justice systems around the world. Research indicates that the problem has always existed but has only come to light in recent decades due to forensic advancements allowing for post-conviction DNA testing of crime scene evidence. Wrongful convictions occur because of human limitations in investigation and evidence collection, such as memory weaknesses and malleability (leading to misidentifications by eyewitnesses), unreliable or faulty forensic evidence, false confessions, confirmation bias or tunnel vision on behalf of investigators, inadequate defense lawyering, and many other human problems. Thus, wrongful convictions exist in all legal systems around the world, as all nations use the same types of evidence and investigation techniques regardless of the precise legal procedures employed in their courtrooms.

NGOs called “Innocence Projects” have sprung up around the globe to combat this problem, and now entire networks of innocence projects exist in Asia, Europe, North America and South America. Innocence Projects are often housed at law schools and are operated by law professors and law students. In one member state, for example, more than 3,000 innocent people have been released from prison in recent years due to the work of NGOs like Innocence Projects. Exonerations of the innocent have occurred across the globe in the past three decades.

For a brief video overview of the global problem of wrongful convictions, and the efforts of Innocence Projects to combat the problem, please view: <https://youtu.be/jMATkuFaRU8>

As the innocence movement has developed a global presence in recent years, it has become apparent to legal scholars that an “Innocence Gap” exists in international law. The WCILTF formed to combat this problem and help fill the Innocence Gap. The WCILTF is comprised of more than twenty-five law professors and Innocence Project leaders from across Asia, Europe, North America and South America.

II. Filling the Innocence Gap

Due to the relatively recent discovery of wrongful convictions, international law covenants and treaties predate awareness of this problem and thus do not speak directly to issue. In recent years, however, the United Nations Human Rights Committee (HRC) has identified key rights to the benefit of incarcerated person claiming innocence to be derived from the right to a fair trial and other existing rights. For example, in *Abdiev v. Kazakhstan*, 2023, the HRC stated that ***the right of incarcerated persons to re-open a criminal case in order to present new evidence of innocence after conviction and appeal have concluded, in order to achieve exoneration and freedom, is essential to the right to a fair trial under Article 14(1) of the ICCPR***. Similarly, on October 3, 2023, in Concluding Observations on the Fifth Periodic Report of the Republic of Korea, the HRC observed that South Korea should “provide adequate legal and financial assistance to enable individuals sentenced to death to ***re-examine convictions on the basis of newly discovered evidence, including new DNA evidence***.” Likewise, on July 25, 2024, in Concluding Observations on the Second Periodic Report of Maldives, the HRC expressed concern “about the lack of information on the existence of a procedure enabling individuals sentenced to death to seek a review of their convictions and sentences based on newly discovered evidence of their innocence, including new DNA evidence, and, if wrongfully convicted, to provide them with compensation.” The HRC recommended that Maldives take all necessary measures to ensure that “death sentence can be reviewed based on ***newly discovered evidence of their innocence***, including new DNA evidence, adequate legal and financial assistance is provided to enable this review and, ***if wrongfully convicted, individuals have access to effective remedies***, including compensation” para. 28(e). See Brandon Garrett, Laurence Helfer and Jayne Huckerby, *Closing International Law’s Innocence Gap*, S. Cal. L. Rev. 95 (2021), available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3803518#.

III. Rights of Innocent Incarcerated Persons in Rwanda

Based on the research of the WCILTF, it is our belief that Rwanda does have a legal mechanism for exoneration based on new evidence of innocence. According to the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, both the defense and the prosecution have the ability to file an appeal based on new evidence that was not known to the moving party at the time of the trial. However, there is little evidence that shows Rwanda meaningfully provides access to these procedures for the average incarcerated individual. Practical barriers such as lack of resources, limited legal assistance, and political interference often render these mechanisms inaccessible or ineffective.

Rwanda provides a legal mechanism for post-conviction revision based on newly discovered evidence. However, while Rule 120 of the ICTR Rules offers a formal path, there is little evidence that this mechanism is widely accessible or functional in practice. Financial constraints, lack of legal representation, and political influences often prevent incarcerated individuals from effectively utilizing this avenue.

Although Protais Zigiranyirazo was successfully exonerated, his case was unique because it involved international oversight and UN appeals mechanisms. Ordinary Rwandan prisoners likely lack similar access to independent judicial review, raising serious doubts about the consistent application of post-conviction relief domestically.

The Rwanda Forensic Institute performs DNA testing, but significant gaps remain. It is unclear whether biological evidence is preserved long-term, and there is no publicly available national regulation guaranteeing evidence preservation for future post-conviction analysis. Without such guarantees, any right to post-conviction DNA testing is hollow.

While Rwanda enacted an Access to Information Law, its broad national security exemptions severely limit practical access to police and judicial records. Defense attorneys and NGOs often face denials and frustrating efforts to uncover wrongful convictions.

Although Rule 66(B) requires disclosure of material evidence to the defense, the absence of penalties for noncompliance undermines this requirement. Prosecutors have little incentive to comply, particularly in politically sensitive cases.

Although Rwanda cites financial inability as the reason for lacking a compensation system, this results in an effective denial of any remedy for the wrongfully convicted. International law expects compensation regardless of a state's financial status.

There is no formal law requiring the recording of interrogations, and reliance on informal practices leaves significant room for abuse. Moreover, the absence of regulations ensuring scientifically sound eyewitness identification procedures increases the risk of wrongful convictions.

IV. Questions to Rwanda

1. Does Rwanda have a legal procedure for post-conviction revision or re-opening of convictions based on new evidence of innocence?
2. Have courts in Rwanda fairly and objectively applied existing legal procedure for post-conviction revision or re-opening of convictions based on new evidence of innocence?
3. If so, is there a deadline by which such a motion must be brought, or may an incarcerated person bring such a legal motion at any time?
4. If so, what is the legal standard that the incarcerated person must meet to reopen the case?

5. Have any post-conviction motions presenting new evidence of innocence been successfully granted by a court in Rwanda, resulting in the incarcerated person's exoneration and freedom? Have any such motions been denied by courts in Rwanda?
6. Does Rwanda have a law allowing incarcerated persons to petition for post-conviction DNA testing of crime scene evidence to prove innocence and seek relief?
7. Does Rwanda have a legal procedure requiring biological evidence collected from the crime scene to be preserved for future DNA testing?
8. If so, how long must the biological evidence be preserved?
9. Does Rwanda have a "sunshine law" or "public records law" granting defense attorneys, NGOs, journalists or incarcerated persons access to police files and documents of an incarcerated person's case post-conviction?
10. Does Rwanda have a legal standard requiring the police and prosecution to disclose to the defense pre-trial any exculpatory evidence or other information helpful to the defense or that might lead to new avenues of pre-trial investigation that might be conducted by the defense?
11. If so, what is the legal standard pertaining to this disclosure requirement?
12. Does Rwanda have a law providing compensation to the wrongfully convicted after exoneration and release from prison? If so, what do such laws provide?
13. Does Rwanda have laws or regulations requiring the recording of police interrogation of suspects? If so, please outline the requirements of such laws or regulations.
14. Does Rwanda have laws or regulations ensuring that police identification procedures for eyewitnesses adhere to best practices devised by the scientific community, such as the double-blind eyewitness identification requirement? See <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/double-blind-sequential-police-lineup-procedures-toward-integrated>
15. Does Rwanda have an independent court ruling on petitions for review?

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