



28 April 2025

In behalf of

African Association of Jehovah's Witnesses

And

The European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses

Joint Submission to the United Nations Human Rights Committee

Prior to the Adoption of the List of Issues

144th session (23 June–25 July 2025)

Rwanda

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351/RGB/CEO/2025

ABOUT THE SUBMITTING ORGANIZATIONS

African Association of Jehovah's Witnesses (AAJW) is a public benefit organization with membership in Angola, Benin, Burundi, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

The European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses (EAJW) is a charity registered in the United Kingdom (No. 1085157) with membership throughout the member States of the Council of Europe.

These Associations work together to promote the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms in various parts of the world, particularly when Jehovah's Witnesses face violations of such rights. This submission is prepared and submitted jointly.

SUMMARY OF THE SUBMISSION

This submission to the Human Rights Committee (CCPR) on Rwanda highlights violations of the provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights prior to the adoption of the list of issues to be taken up in connection with the consideration of the fifth report of Rwanda.

Jehovah's Witnesses in Rwanda and as a worldwide organization respectfully request the Government of Rwanda to:

- (1) Ensure that freedom of worship and its public manifestation are respected;
- (2) Ensure that conscientious objection to bearing arms is consistently respected and that conscientious objectors are not arbitrarily detained;
- (3) Ensure that children can enjoy education without pressure to violate their own, and their parents', peaceful religious beliefs;
- (4) Ensure that choice of viable medical treatment and the right to refuse treatment that violates religious conscience is respected in public hospitals;
- (5) Abide by its commitment to uphold the fundamental freedoms guaranteed by the Covenant for all citizens, including Jehovah's Witnesses.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Jehovah's Witnesses have been present in Rwanda for more than 50 years. Between 1982 and 1992, their peaceful religious activity was banned because of their political neutrality. In 1992, they were granted legal registration, and this was updated and reconfirmed in 2002.
2. During 1994, more than 400 of Jehovah's Witnesses were killed during the genocide against the Tutsi, either for their ethnicity or for hiding members of a different ethnic group and refusing to share in the genocide. The Swiss weekly journal *Reformierte Presse-Impressum*, 8 December 1998, reported that Jehovah's Witnesses did not participate in the genocide.
3. There are currently some 37,000 of Jehovah's Witnesses in Rwanda, and more than 112,000 attend their peaceful meetings for religious worship.
4. In general, Jehovah's Witnesses enjoy freedom of worship in Rwanda. The new Law n° 71/2024 of 26/06/2024 governing persons and family, released in the *Official Gazette n° Special of 30/07/2024*, repealed a requirement for persons getting married to take an oath holding the national flag, which offends the religious conscience of Jehovah's Witnesses. Alternatives to certain obligations violating religious conscience, such as the requirement to perform armed night patrol, or in lieu to pay "security fees" to those who do the patrol and accept militaristic training, have been provided for Witnesses in many places. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses may make payments that do not violate their conscience such as meeting the cost of health insurance for the needy.

5. On 15 March 2023, the Minister of Education (MoE) wrote to all district mayors and executive administrations instructing schools to respect the freedom of worship of students who are Jehovah's Witnesses.
6. Nevertheless, as set out in more detail below, Jehovah's Witnesses are still on occasion subjected to demands that violate their religious conscience, are denied education because of their religious beliefs, or are refused medical treatment unless they agree to treatment in conflict with their sincere religious beliefs. Such violations of Covenant provisions have increased following the recent inspection and closure of some churches in Rwanda, which began on 28 July 2024.

II. VIOLATIONS OF THE PROVISIONS OF THE COVENANT

Freedom of thought, conscience and religion (article 18) along with right to liberty (article 9) and protection against interference with privacy and family (article 17); rights of minorities (article 27)

7. Rwanda acceded to the Covenant on 16 April 1975.
8. On 6 February 2025, the Office of Jehovah's Witnesses in Rwanda received a letter from the Rwanda Governance Board (RGB) requesting that they conduct all religious activities in church premises (see Annex 1). In this letter, RGB revoked prior permission provided by local authorities, such as by Kigali City in 2014, to place small mobile literature carts in public places. This limits freedom to publicly manifest religious beliefs, as protected by article 18 of the Covenant and article 37 of the Constitution of Rwanda. Jehovah's Witness are currently in dialogue with RGB on this matter.
9. Jehovah's Witnesses will not take up arms or support armed action, either militarily or domestically, for reasons of religious conscience. This includes making payments specifically in support of armed forces. Such exercise of freedom of conscience and religion is protected by article 18 of the Covenant as more particularly explained in General Comment No. 22, 27 September 1993 (CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4).
10. In 2005, the Government of Rwanda instructed local authorities to provide alternatives to night patrol for Jehovah's Witnesses. However, since September 2024, four adult Witnesses have been arrested for not participating in night patrol paying so-called "security fees". In each case, and following representations, they were released after a few days but had been subjected to arbitrary detention and the associated indignity. This violates article 9 of the Covenant, which provides: "No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention."
11. In the Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of Rwanda (CCPR/C/RWA/CO/4, para. 20), the CCPR recommended that the State party: "(c) Ensure that allegations of unlawful detention, torture and ill-treatment are promptly investigated and that the perpetrators are brought to justice; (d) Guarantee that persons who have been victims of unlawful detention, torture and ill-treatment have an effective right to remedy and redress."
12. As stated above, on 15 March 2023, the MoE wrote to district mayors and executive administrations, instructing schools to respect the freedom of worship of students who are Jehovah's Witnesses. However, an apparent lack of awareness of the law protecting freedom

of worship at school has led some school authorities to dismiss students who are Jehovah's Witnesses for not joining religious services conducted by other denominations. This violates article 18(1), (2) and (4) of the Covenant.

13. From the start of the school year beginning January 2025, nine Witness students have been dismissed from school. At the time of writing, five of them remain at home, two were able to return to school after representations, and two continued their studies in other schools.
14. Some public hospitals ignore Jehovah's Witness patients' rights to consent to or refuse certain medical treatments, as provided for by the law, and to choose clinically viable alternatives within the medical mainstream. In some situations, treatment that violates parents' religious conscience has been forced on minor children against parental objections while ignoring requests for such viable alternatives. This violates the protection of privacy and family that is provided for by article 17 of the Covenant, in addition to being a violation of article 18.
15. In the Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of Rwanda (CCPR/C/RWA/CO/4, para. 48) the CCPR recommended that: "The State party should take the steps necessary to guarantee the recognition of minorities."
16. As a religious minority, Jehovah's Witnesses have found that their Covenant protected right "to profess and practise their own religion" (article 27) is not always appropriately recognized.

III. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

17. Jehovah's Witnesses in Rwanda and as a worldwide organization express their appreciation for the progress made in support of their freedom of worship in Rwanda. However, they express concern about ongoing human rights violations, as exposed above in the submission. They respectfully request the Government of Rwanda to take the necessary steps to:
 - (1) Ensure that freedom of worship and its public manifestation are respected;
 - (2) Ensure that conscientious objection to bearing arms is consistently respected and that conscientious objectors are not arbitrarily detained;
 - (3) Ensure that children can enjoy education without pressure to violate their own, and their parents', peaceful religious beliefs;
 - (4) Ensure that choice of viable medical treatment and the right to refuse treatment that violates religious conscience is respected in public hospitals;
 - (5) Abide by its commitment to uphold the fundamental freedoms guaranteed by the Covenant for all citizens, including Jehovah's Witnesses.
18. AAJW and EAJW will consider submitting an additional complementary submission with the CCPR after the list of issues has been adopted.

Rwanda Governance Board	<p>Urwego rw'Igihugu rw'Imiyoborere</p> 	<p>Office Rwandais de la Gouvernance</p>
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Kigali, 5/02/2025
Ref. N° 351/RGB/CEO/2025

**The Legal Representative
Jehovah's Witnesses Church
KIGALI**

Re: Requesting you to conduct all church/religious activities in church premises

Dear Legal Representative,

Reference is made to Art.13 and Art. 23 of the Law no 72/2018 of 31/08/2018 determining the organization and functioning of Faith Based Organizations;

We would like to recall and bring to your attention the fact that all religious-related of a Faith-Based Organization are to be conducted/ delivered in designated facilities/ premises of the organization that meet the requirements of the law;

It has come to our attention that there have been instances of Jehovah's Witnesses setting up roadside stands to preach, distribute, and/or sell magazines and books. While the law recognizes the right to freedom of religion and expression, we must emphasize that under Rwandan law, all church and religious activities, including outreach and distribution of religious materials, must be conducted within the premises designated for such purposes.

The purpose of this letter is to remind your organization to comply accordingly. Failure to comply with this regulation may result in legal sanctions as per the provisions of the law.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Yours sincerely,

**Dr. Doris UWICYEZA PICARD
Chief Executive Officer**

CC:

- **Hon. Minister of Local Government**

<p>Rwanda Governance Board</p>	<p>Urwego rw'Igihugu rw'Imiyoborere</p> 	<p>Office Rwandais de la Gouvernance</p>
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- IGP, Rwanda National Police