



# Rwanda: Current Issues

## Overview

Under the leadership of President Paul Kagame, Rwanda has become known for its rapid development and security gains since the devastating 1994 genocide, in which an estimated 800,000 people were killed. The minority ethnic Tutsi community was targeted in the genocide, along with politically moderate members of the Hutu majority, in a state-backed extermination campaign. The Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) took power in 1994 and ended the genocide. RPF efforts to improve health systems, the economy, and gender equality have received substantial support from foreign donors, including the United States. Development indicators have improved markedly in the past two decades, but poverty remains widespread. While praising Rwanda’s progress, U.S. officials have also criticized its domestic constraints on political and civil freedoms and the government’s recent history of backing rebel groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

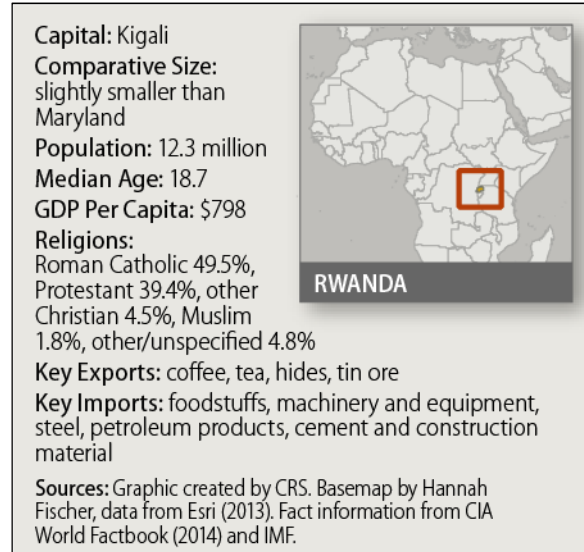
By investing in its people, Rwanda is building a strong foundation for peace and prosperity in the years to come. *Secretary of State John Kerry, July 2, 2014.*

President Kagame has been in office since 2000, and previously served as Vice President and Defense Minister in post-genocide transitional regimes. He last won reelection with 93% of votes in 2010. The election was peaceful and well organized, but observers—including Obama Administration officials—expressed concerns about media restrictions, the expulsion of an international human rights researcher prior to the vote, and prohibitions on opposition party participation. Analysts debate whether Kagame may seek to remain in office past 2017, when his current term ends and he faces constitutional term limits.

## Politics and Security

The RPF dominates state institutions, and Kagame appears to face no serious internal challenger. Independent opposition parties, media outlets, and civil society groups are few in number and reportedly operate with difficulty. Public criticism of the RPF’s overarching policies or legitimacy is not tolerated; nor is public discussion of ethnic identity. Critics assert that the government has used laws criminalizing “genocide ideology” and “divisionism,” along with national security provisions, to suppress dissent, to justify prosecutions of journalists and opposition figures, and to limit the ability of human rights groups to report on the country. Rwandan officials reject allegations of abusing human rights, while often arguing that some restrictions are needed to prevent the return of ethnic violence and asserting that the country is gradually liberalizing.

**Figure 1. Rwanda Key Facts**



The State Department’s most recent human rights report states that one of Rwanda’s “most important human rights problems” is “the government’s targeting of political opponents and human rights advocates for harassment, arrest, and abuse.” Some observers question whether constraints on freedom of expression and political activity may threaten stability by depriving opponents of peaceful avenues for activism.

Some RPF defectors and other regime opponents have attempted to organize outside the country. Human rights organizations accuse the government of targeting exiled dissidents for assassination, which the government denies. In early 2014, a top RPF defector—a former head of external intelligence who had become active in a diaspora opposition movement known as the Rwanda National Congress (RNC)—was murdered in South Africa. President Kagame said in a press interview that “Rwanda did not kill this person... but I add that, I actually wish Rwanda did it.” He also reportedly stated in public remarks that “whoever betrays the country will pay the price.” Another leading RNC figure, former army chief of staff General Kayumba Nyamwasa, was the victim of an armed attack in 2010 while living in South Africa. In 2014, a South African court convicted two Rwandans and two Tanzanians in the attack, and the judge stated that he believed the incident was politically motivated.

Rwanda’s military is considered to be among the most effective in Africa. Rwandan peacekeepers have participated in multiple U.N. and African-led peacekeeping operations, and are generally reported to be disciplined and committed. In 2015, however, news reports implicated Rwandan soldiers serving in Mali in the shooting of protesters during a violent anti-U.N. demonstration. Rwanda reportedly withdrew the units involved.

Rwanda asserts that it faces a national security threat from the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), a DRC-based militia founded by Hutu extremists involved in the Rwandan genocide. The FDLR and its leaders are under United Nations (U.N.) and U.S. sanctions. The FDLR is also nominally the target of DRC military operations, and the U.N. peacekeeping operation in DRC is authorized to disarm it. However, previous military operations have failed to defeat the group. In 2014, Human Rights Watch reported that Rwanda had held some alleged FDLR collaborators in unacknowledged detention centers prior to charging them in court.

## Role in Democratic Republic of Congo

Rwanda has security, political, and economic interests in its larger and chronically unstable neighbor. It has deployed its military into DRC on several occasions since the 1990s, and has reportedly backed several armed rebellions there. At times, Rwandan and DRC troops have also cooperated in operations to counter militia groups in DRC. While denying specific allegations of backing DRC rebel groups, Rwandan officials often voice potential justifications for such actions. They contend that DRC security forces have failed to rein in groups, such as the FDLR, that threaten Rwanda—and have at times collaborated with them. Officials also sometimes point to discrimination and violence targeting ethnic communities of Rwandan origin in DRC, implying that they may require protection. Some analysts contend that economic incentives are another factor in Rwanda’s involvement in DRC, and that powerful Rwandans have profited from resource smuggling there.

U.S. officials publicly criticized Rwanda in 2012 and 2013 for providing support to a DRC-based armed group known as the M23. Rwandan officials denied the allegations, and instead blamed instability on DRC’s institutional dysfunctions and a lack of political will to confront security challenges. In late 2013, the DRC military, backed by U.N. peacekeeping troops, defeated the M23. Earlier that year, Rwanda signed onto a U.N.-backed regional peace “framework accord” that prohibited neighboring states from involvement in conflicts in DRC. Widespread insecurity persists in eastern DRC, but there have been fewer reports of direct Rwandan involvement.

## The Economy

Donor aid, political stability, and pro-investor policies have contributed to economic growth averaging nearly 8% per year over the past decade. Key foreign exchange earners include a small but growing mining sector, tourism, and exports of coffee and tea. Still, about 90% of Rwandans remain engaged in agriculture, many for subsistence, and about 45% reportedly live below the poverty line. Rwanda has the highest population density in continental Africa, which threatens the sustainability of subsistence farming. The government is undertaking ambitious efforts to transform the economy into one that is services-oriented, to lower birth rates, and to develop domestic sources of energy, with the goal of making Rwanda a middle-income country by 2020. Regional economic integration backed by the East African Community (EAC) could boost foreign

investment and trade, but political differences among EAC members have hindered progress.

Donor aid is substantial, and Rwanda qualified for international debt relief in 2005. However, in 2012, some donors reduced or redirected funding due to Rwanda’s role in the M23 crisis. In response, Rwanda sought new domestic and private-sector sources of finance, creating a national “solidarity” fund, which solicits donations, and issuing international bonds.

## U.S. Policy and Aid

The United States and Rwanda have cultivated close ties since the late 1990s, although in recent years the Obama Administration and some Members of Congress have expressed concerns about Rwanda’s domestic and regional policies. As noted above, the Administration openly criticized Rwanda’s role in the M23 insurgency in DRC. Congress has also enacted restrictions on certain types of U.S. military aid to Rwanda through foreign aid appropriations measures since FY2010. Previously, U.S. officials had largely avoided public censure of Rwanda.

U.S. bilateral aid to Rwanda grew significantly from \$39 million appropriated in FY2003 to \$188 million in FY2014. In part, this rise reflected overall trends in U.S. aid to Africa, which increased substantially during the same period, particularly for health programs. It also reflected a widely-held view that Rwanda is a leader in achieving donor-assisted development outcomes. U.S. aid to Rwanda is largely focused on health, food security, and other socioeconomic goals, along with support for Rwanda’s participation in international peacekeeping operations. The Administration requested \$171 million in bilateral aid for Rwanda in FY2015, a slight decrease compared to FY2014, of which 72% would be for health assistance. The Administration has requested \$161 million for FY2016. U.S. support for Rwandan peacekeepers is provided separately from these bilateral aid allocations, and includes training, equipment, and other assistance.

In 2012 and 2013, legislation enacted by Congress resulted in restrictions on some types of U.S. military aid for Rwanda. The FY2012 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 112-74) prohibited Foreign Military Financing (FMF) if Rwanda was found to be providing support to DRC-based armed groups. The Administration also applied a security assistance prohibition contained in the Child Soldiers Prevention Act (P.L. 110-457, as amended) in connection with Rwanda’s support for the M23, which reportedly used child soldiers. Both provisions exempted most aid related to peacekeeping support. The Administration lifted both restrictions in 2014, citing the end of the M23 rebellion.

The FY2015 Consolidated and Further Appropriations Act (P.L. 113-235) prohibits FMF for Rwanda, except for certain purposes (including peacekeeping), unless the Secretary of State certifies that Rwanda is “implementing a policy to cease political, military and/or financial support” for armed groups in DRC.

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