OPEN LETTER TO THE HEADS OF STATE AND GOVERNMENT OF THE COMMONWEALTH

CHOGM 2026 – Antigua and Barbuda

Subject: Urgent Appeal for the Release of Political Prisoners, and an Inclusive Inter-Rwandan Dialogue.

2 November 2026

Your Majesties, Your Excellencies, Honourable Heads of State and Government, Distinguished Commonwealth Leaders,

As you gather in Antigua and Barbuda for CHOGM 2026, I respectfully appeal to your collective conscience, diplomatic influence and commitment to the fundamental values of the Commonwealth.

Rwanda, my country, a Commonwealth member since 2009 and host of CHOGM 2022, continues to face serious concerns regarding political freedoms, human rights and democratic participation. Meanwhile, the conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) continues to inflict immense suffering on civilian populations.

The Commonwealth Charter commits its members to democracy, human rights, freedom of expression and the rule of law. These principles must apply equally to every member state.

1. THE CASE OF VICTOIRE INGABIRE UMUHOZA: SIXTEEN YEARS OF POLITICAL STRUGGLE

Your Excellencies,

The case of **Victoire Ingabire Umuhoza** deserves your particular attention.

After approximately sixteen years in exile in the Netherlands, she returned to Rwanda on **16 January 2010**, determined to participate peacefully in her country's political life and contest the presidential election scheduled for August that year. Instead of participating in the election, she faced criminal

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proceedings. Arrested in 2010, she was sentenced to eight years in prison in 2012, a sentence increased to fifteen years by Rwanda's Supreme Court in 2013.

She subsequently brought her case before the **African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights**, which ruled on **24 November 2017** that Rwanda had violated her rights to freedom of expression and a fair trial. Released in September 2018, she continued her peaceful political engagement despite restrictions on her activities. On **19 June 2025, she was arrested again**, facing new criminal allegations which are politically motivated. Sixteen years after returning from exile to participate in peaceful democratic politics, Victoire Ingabire once again finds herself behind bars. **Must political participation in Rwanda remain synonymous with imprisonment, exile or silence? Numerous Human Rights defenders have raised voices on this isuues and the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has recommended that she should be released immediately and unconditionally.**

I respectfully appeal to you to use your influence with President Paul Kagame to secure her immediate and unconditional release.

Victoire Ingabire is not alone. I urge you to raise the cases of **Déo Mushayidi, Théoneste Nsengimana, Dieudonné Niyonsenga (Cyuma Hassan)** and other individuals detained for peacefully exercising their fundamental freedoms.

No country becomes stronger by silencing dissent. No president earns lasting respect by imprisoning political opponents, and no nation achieves genuine reconciliation by denying its citizens the freedom to disagree.

2. CONVENE AN INCLUSIVE INTER-RWANDAN DIALOGUE BEFORE UNDERTAKING POLITICAL REFORMS

Your Excellencies,

Political reforms in Rwanda must be preceded by a genuine, inclusive and internationally facilitated Inter-Rwandan Dialogue.

Rwanda's political challenges cannot be sustainably resolved through unilateral decisions imposed by those currently holding power. Lasting democratic transformation requires a nationally owned process in which Rwandans themselves collectively determine the future of their country.

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I therefore urge Commonwealth leaders to encourage and facilitate the convening of an **Inclusive Inter-Rwandan Dialogue**, bringing together the Rwandan government, political opposition inside Rwanda and in exile, civil society organisations, religious leaders, youth and women's representatives, and the Rwandan diaspora. Such a dialogue must be conducted in a safe, neutral and credible environment, with appropriate international facilitation and guarantees that participants will not face intimidation, arrest or reprisals for expressing their views. Its agenda should include national reconciliation, fundamental freedoms, constitutional and institutional reforms, political pluralism, electoral governance, judicial independence, security-sector accountability and guarantees for the peaceful transfer of political power. **The dialogue should come first and Political reforms should emerge from its consensual recommendations rather than be predetermined by the government.**

The Commonwealth, working with the African Union and other credible international partners, can play an important role in facilitating this historic process.

3. CALL FOR THE WITHDRAWAL OF RWANDAN FORCES FROM THE DRC

Your Excellencies,

The continuing conflict in eastern DRC has caused immense suffering, displacement and loss of innocent lives. I urge Commonwealth leaders to call upon President Kagame to **withdraw the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) from Congolese territory**, in accordance with international law and relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions. Rwanda's legitimate security concerns should be addressed through diplomacy, regional cooperation and peaceful mechanisms that respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of neighbouring countries.

Withdrawing Rwandan troops from the DRC would not make President Kagame weaker. It would make Rwanda more respected and more respectable within the international community.

4. AN APPEAL TO THE CONSCIENCE OF THE COMMONWEALTH

Your Majesties, Your Excellencies,

I respectfully request that you:

1. **Call for the immediate release** of Victoire Ingabire Umuhoza and other political prisoners and prisoners of conscience.

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2. **Support the urgent convening of an Inclusive Inter-Rwandan Dialogue**, under credible international facilitation, as an essential prerequisite to comprehensive political and institutional reforms.

3. **Encourage democratic reforms based on the outcomes of that dialogue**, including political pluralism, independent media, judicial independence and guarantees of fundamental freedoms.

4. **Demand the withdrawal of RDF forces from the DRC** and support credible diplomatic initiatives for lasting regional peace.

The strength and prestige of a nation are not measured by the number of political opponents imprisoned, silenced, killed or forced into exile, but by its willingness to protect the rights and dignity of every citizen.

As a **Commonwealth of Learning alumnus**, I believe in the transformative power of education, dialogue, human dignity and the shared values that unite Commonwealth nations. These values that guide my political engagement as one of leaders of ISHEMA Party, must not remain declarations on paper. They must inspire concrete action when the fundamental rights of Commonwealth citizens are at stake. **Let CHOGM 2026 be remembered not merely for diplomatic ceremonies, but for the courage of its leaders to defend freedom, justice, reconciliation and lasting peace.**

I, therefore, implore you to use your influence with President Paul Kagame. Releasing political prisoners, convening an inclusive national dialogue, implementing its agreed reforms and withdrawing RDF forces from the DRC would constitute meaningful steps towards a peaceful, democratic and respected Rwanda.

Respectfully,

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