

## **TLHRC Briefing**

### ***Kenya: Tensions between Human Rights and Security, and the Shrinking Space for Civil Society***

**March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2015**

#### **JPM Opening Remarks**

Good afternoon, and welcome to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's briefing on *Kenya: Tensions between Human Rights and Security, and the Shrinking Space for Civil Society*. I thank all of our panelists for their presence today, and also thank the staff of the Commission for organizing this briefing.

Our government views Kenya as a strategic partner and anchor state in East Africa. After Al Qaeda bombed the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, the U.S.-Kenya partnership took on a new counter-terrorism dimension. Kenya expanded its efforts to counter violent extremism in its region in late 2011, when as part of an African Union initiative it launched military operations in Somalia against a regional Al Qaeda "affiliate," Al Shabaab.

The United States has also valued Kenya's role as a peacemaker among its neighbors and as a host to refugees from across the region. I have also been privileged to see first-hand some of the school feeding, food security and HIV-AIDS health programs that Kenyans are carrying out with U.S. funding. With U.S. aid levels approaching \$1 billion annually, Kenya is one of the top recipients of U.S. foreign assistance globally. Last August the Administration included Kenya in the Security Governance Initiative, a new joint endeavor between the U.S. and six African partners described as offering a comprehensive approach to improving security sector governance and capacity to address threats.

But as we are seeing in a number of countries with which we partner in the fight against terrorism, Kenya faces internal governance and human rights challenges that threaten to undermine the country's long-term stability – specifically, periodic ethnic disputes like the civil unrest that followed contested elections in December 2007, in which a thousand people died and 600,000 were displaced, and impunity for state corruption and political violence.

In December 2014 the International Criminal Court had to drop the indictment it had issued against Uhuru Kenyatta, Kenya's current president, for instigating and financing the 2008 post-election violence, in part due to lack of cooperation by the Kenyan government -- there were allegations of witness intimidation and suspicious deaths. Most recently we've seen very troubling security legislation adopted and the proposal of legislation that would restrict NGOs, potential steps backwards for democracy; and the brutal treatment of Muslim communities in the government's fight against Al-Shabaab, a tactic that we already know from experience deepens sectarian conflict and radicalizes those targeted.

This afternoon our distinguished speakers, all from Kenya, will bring us up to date on the state of civil liberties in the country; the security situation after last September's Westgate Mall attacks, for which al-Shabaab claimed responsibility; and the tension between the Kenyan government and the Muslim community. We especially look forward to hearing their recommendations for what the U.S. Congress can do to ensure that the security collaboration between our countries does not overshadow the goals of strengthening democracy and protecting the human rights of all Kenya's citizens.

Thank you.