Rwandan transnational repression is exceptionally broad in terms of tactics, targets, and geographic reach. Rwandans abroad experience digital threats, spyware attacks, family intimidation and harassment, mobility controls, physical intimidation, assault, detention, rendition, and assassination. The government has physically targeted Rwandans in at least seven countries since 2014, including the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Kenya, as well as farther afield in South Africa, the United Arab Emirates, and Germany. Rwandans as far-flung as the United States, Canada, and Australia report intense fears of surveillance and retribution. The cases documented by Freedom House represent a small fraction of alleged incidents, but provide a useful window into the extent and methods of the Rwandan government’s campaign, especially when taken into consideration alongside interviews, existing research, and the broader pattern of allegations.

The government usually targets individuals who challenge it through criticism or active resistance, or who question its version of Rwandan history. Authorities take an extremely broad view of what constitutes dissent and seek to exert control over the totality of the diaspora, including through its embassies and official diaspora organizations. Even communicating with fellow Rwandans who have run afoul of the government poses a risk. “No [Rwandan] wants to have coffee with me even though we are thousands of kilometers from the country,” a Rwandan exile residing in Europe told Freedom House. The commitment to controlling Rwandans abroad and the resources devoted to the effort are stunning when considering that Rwanda is a country of 13 million people where roughly a third of the population lives below the poverty line. The Rwandan government is among the most prolific transnational repression actors worldwide.
A long history

Transnational repression has been a feature of President Paul Kagame’s regime since the early days of his rule. Kagame and his Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) came to power following the 1994 genocide of Tutsis and civil war, which ended with the victory of the mostly Tutsi RPF against the previous Hutu-dominated regime. The RPF’s version of events, in which the RPF stopped the genocide and saved the country, has become official history, and different descriptions are criminalized as “genocide ideology” and “divisionism.” This has not stopped numerous critics, defectors, and journalists—as well as international human rights organizations—from alleging that the RPF facilitated, allowed, or conducted war crimes and crimes against humanity of its own during the civil war. These allegations personally implicate Kagame as the leader of the RPF during the conflict, and call into question his personal mythology as a peace bringer and hero.

Kagame’s regime has gained an international reputation for maintaining stability and economic growth, but at least some of the regime’s longevity is made possible by persistent suppression of political dissent through surveillance, intimidation, and violence. These tactics are used indiscriminately within Rwanda and are mirrored outside the country. “What I can tell you is that in justice there is no long distance. Wherever anyone who tries to destabilize the country is located, they should be aware that justice will reach you,” said a spokesperson for the Rwanda Investigations Bureau, after rendering an alleged rebel leader from Comoros in 2019.

Severe transnational repression dates to the early days of RPF rule and has continued throughout. Théoneste Lizinde and Augustin Bugirimfura—a former insider and a businessman, respectively—were killed in Kenya in 1996. Two years later, former interior minister Seth Sendashonga was shot to death, also in Kenya. In 2010, General Kayumba Nyamwasa, a former member of the Rwandan military, survived an assassination attempt in South Africa. A year later three Rwandan exiles in the United Kingdom faced threats against their lives, at least two of whom received direct warnings from the London police. Interspersed between these high-profile incidents are numerous other disappearances, attacks,assassinations, and threats, amounting to a multidecade campaign against Rwandans abroad.

High-profile global targets

The bulk of documented Rwandan cases involve high-profile exiles, many of whom are former military figures or insiders from Kagame’s government who have fallen out of favor, and who are often affiliated with opposition groups like the Rwanda National Congress (RNC). The government focuses on these figures in particular because they are most capable of drawing on insider knowledge to challenge the narratives about the genocide and Kagame’s rise to power, upon which he bases much of his credibility, and have sufficient status to persuade Rwandans or international partners to turn on the regime.

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–spokesperson for the Rwanda Investigations Bureau

A group of former regime insiders founded the RNC in 2010. The following year, four of the founding members were sentenced in absentia to 20 years in prison on charges including threatening state security. Among those sentenced were Patrick Karegeya, a former head of the intelligence service who was murdered in a Johannesburg hotel on January 1, 2014, and Lieutenant General Kayumba Nyamwasa, who was shot in 2010 after escaping to South Africa, but survived. As of 2019, Nyamwasa said he has been targeted for assassination at least four times. Of Karegeya’s murder, the Rwandan defense minister said, “When you choose to be a dog, you die like a dog.”

Labeling opposition groups, like the RNC, as terrorist organizations gives the Rwandan government’s persecution a veneer of legitimacy on the world stage and offers a pretext for taking action against alleged affiliates of the group. Five of the ten physical cases documented in this report’s time period involve an accusation of terrorism, and it is a common feature among many other alleged physical and nonphysical cases.

Events surrounding the recent rendition of Paul Rusesabagina reflect the multidecade time period of Rwandan transnational repression, and illustrates key characteristics common to many high-profile cases. Rusesabagina, a Hutu, was a hotel manager at the time of the genocide who sheltered hundreds of people fleeing from the killing; the Oscar-nominated 2004 movie Hotel Rwanda later turned him into an international hero. By
then, however, he had already fled the country; he left in 1996 after being warned that he was in danger—a credible threat given that he had survived an assassination attempt two years previously. He settled in Belgium, where he lived until 2009, when he again relocated out of fear for his safety, this time to the US.

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From the perspective of the Rwandan government, his prominence was a threat, as was the way his account of the genocide diverged from the official narrative. In exile he became a fierce critic of the government and president of the opposition coalition Rwanda Movement for Democratic Change (MRCD), and according to the government’s accusations, a supporter of terrorism through the MRCD’s armed wing, the National Liberation Forces.

In August 2020, the Rwandan government finally caught up with Rusesabagina: he was rendered from Dubai to Kigali, where he is still being held despite an international outcry. “It was actually flawless,” Kagame said, alluding to the successful plot to lure Rusesabagina onto a plane. “It’s like if you fed somebody with a false story that fits well in his narrative of what he wants to be and he follows it and then finds himself in a place like that.” His sophisticated rendition is characteristic of the planning and resources that Rwanda devotes to transnational repression, as is the charge of terrorism that awaits him in Rwandan courts.

Renditions in Central and East Africa

Beyond the internationally known cases like Karegeya and Rusesabagina, there are many less prominent and less well documented incidents, notably renditions in central and east Africa. Nevertheless, there is a common thread between these regional renditions and high-profile captures like that of Rusesabagina: they are, for the most part, true kidnappings that are executed without any show of due process. Jean Chrysostome Ntirugirabambe—a former military captain who later worked as a defense investigator for the UN tribunal investigating the genocide, and had been living in exile in Togo—traveled to Kenya to visit his family in 2015. On June 23, while shopping in Nairobi, he was forced into a car by a group of armed men and allegedly brought to Rwanda. He hasn’t been heard from since.

There have also been Rwandan renditions from the neighboring DRC, which appear to involve Congolese and Rwandan security officials cooperating on Congolese soil. A 2017 Human Rights Watch report documented the campaign against Rwandans in the DRC, citing interviews with 10 former detainees who were allegedly rendered illegally from the DRC to Rwanda. One interviewee estimated that they were transferred to Rwanda with approximately 17 other Rwandans. Though the sweeping nature and international collaboration that characterize these renditions from the DRC are somewhat unique, the theme of terrorism and antistate actions arises ones again, as the transfers focused on alleged members of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), an armed group based in eastern DRC.

Uganda is another apparent hotspot, though with less direct documentation. David Himbara, a former aide and adviser to Kagame who is now a prominent critic in exile, published an open letter to Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni listing the names of more than 50 Rwandan refugees who were kidnapped or killed in Uganda from 2008 through 2015. While Freedom House was not able to verify the full list, numerous other sources also suggest a massive and underreported assault on Rwandans in Uganda. There are also a handful of well-documented cases from the past two decades, such as that of Charles Ingabire, a journalist assassinated in Kampala in 2011, and Joel Mutabazi, a former bodyguard of Kagame who was kidnapped from a UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) safe house in 2013. Though the sweeping nature and international collaboration that characterize these renditions from the DRC are somewhat unique, the theme of terrorism and antistate actions arises ones again, as the transfers focused on alleged members of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), an armed group based in eastern DRC.

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Nonphysical repression

Rwanda’s highly visible assassinations, renditions, and assaults against its citizens abroad are coupled with a vast campaign of nonphysical repression including spyware attacks, digital threats and harassment, family targeting, and mobility controls.

After CitizenLab exposed the deployment of NSO Group’s Pegasus spyware via WhatsApp, the Financial Times identified six Rwandans affected. Those targeted include members of the RNC; the United Democratic Forces-Inkingi, an opposition party the Rwandan government has accused of terrorism; a human rights defender; and Patrick Karegeya’s nephew. According to the Times, many of the targeted Rwandans fear that their communications helped the Rwandan government track and pursue targets. David Batenga, Karegeya’s nephew, is among those who expressed such concerns:

Mr. Batenga says he is worried about how the information stolen from his phone via Pegasus could have been used. He helped arrange a trip for a Belgium-based compatriot in August, who then vanished a few days after landing in Kampala, the Ugandan capital, despite taking precautions that included changing safe houses.

Faustin Rukundo, an activist and member of the RNC who was subject to Pegasus infection, suspects the malware was involved in the plot to render Rusesabagina. Perceptions of surveillance are widespread; a Rwandan human rights defender living in Uganda told Freedom House that he suspects that his phone calls are being tapped.

Spyware is not the only digital tool deployed against Rwandans. Digital threats and harassment through social media and public smear campaigns are common. Government affiliated and progovernment social media accounts regularly mobilize against individuals who are critical of the government, and the so-called Rwandan Twitter Army systematically harasses and discredits opponents online. Social media users who engage in attacks on behalf of the government are reportedly rewarded with access to government jobs or employment at private companies affiliated with the ruling party.

Progovernment accounts also use mass reporting as a silencing tactic. David Himbara alleges that progovernment Rwandan accounts reported his Facebook posts as violating Facebook’s community standards. Facebook removed his posts from the platform, before reinstating them after Himbara submitted an appeal. However, pushing back on harassment campaigns can be dangerous. Rwandan intelligence services reportedly monitor and report social media users who engage constructively with government critics.

A third nonphysical means that the Rwandan government uses to suppress its nationals abroad is family intimidation and harassment. Nearly all Rwandans Freedom House spoke with for this report expressed fear for their relations who remain in the country. One described it as "psychological torture."

In 2017, prior to the spyware infection, UK resident Faustin Rukundo was subject to family targeting when his then-pregnant wife, Violette Uwamahoro, traveled to Rwanda to attend her father’s funeral. Soon after her arrival, contact with her was lost. More than two weeks after her disappearance, the Rwandan police confirmed that she was in their custody. They charged her and a distant relative with a number of offenses, including revealing state secrets.

Uwamahoro was eventually released on bail and able to return to the United Kingdom.

More recently, in 2019, the two brothers of a Sydney-based Rwandan refugee and human rights defender, Noel Zihabamwe, were abducted by Rwandan police. They have been missing for over a year. Zihabamwe told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), which has reported extensively on the threats facing Rwandans in Australia, that he believes his brothers’ disappearance was retribution for his refusal to cooperate with the regime’s demands and for reporting subsequent threats to the police.

Finally, Rwanda has been known to use mobility controls. In February 2020, Rwanda requested that Uganda cancel the passport of Charlotte Mukankusi as a step toward diplomatic reconciliation between the two countries. Rwanda also confiscated the Australian passport of a Rwandan who returned to the country to see his family in 2019. He has been

“There is no unity anymore, we don’t trust each other anymore.”
– Rwandan activist in the United States
unable to leave Rwanda for more than a year, despite consular assistance from the Australian government.

**Community impacts**

In addition to the evidence provided by existing documentation, Freedom House interviews with Rwandans living in sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, and North America shed light on a diaspora community living in intense fear of their home-country government—and in fear of each other. “They work through the embassy and through the diaspora community,” one Rwandan activist told us. “There is no unity anymore, we don't trust each other anymore.” Lists of dissidents allegedly on Kagame’s “kill list” circulate among Rwandans on social media and messaging platforms. Some Rwandans report avoiding other Rwandans, or remaining very guarded with each other.

Similar allegations about recruitment of diaspora members were leveled by Rwandans in Australia in an extensive report by ABC. The report also documents allegations that the Rwandan government furnishes spies, operatives, and loyalists with false documentation in order to gain asylum and implant themselves in Rwandan communities abroad. Rwandans interviewed by Freedom House raised the same concerns.

In addition to mistrust at an individual level, Rwandans report suspicion of official bodies, including embassies and diaspora organizations. ABC reviewed footage of the chair of the Rwandan Diaspora of Australia, who reportedly received political asylum in Australia in 2004, pledging loyalty in Rwanda’s High Commission in Singapore in 2017. Similarly, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) has reported based on leaked video that Rwandans were forced to take a loyalty oath to the RPF in the Rwandan Embassy to the United Kingdom.

The result of community- and acquaintance-level avenues of repression, as well as the Rwandan regime’s expansive view of what constitutes dissent, is that all Rwandans are at risk of transnational repression. Rwanda’s government has clearly demonstrated its ability and willingness to harm its “enemies” regardless of distance. Many governments are aware of the problem and have taken some action to protect Rwandans, such as when British intelligence services disrupted an assassination plot in London. The US Congress has heard testimony about it multiple times, while Sweden expelled a Rwandan diplomat for refugee espionage and South Africa expelled three after an attack on General Nyamwasa’s home. A Canada Border Services Agency report describes “a well-documented pattern of repression [including threats, attacks, and killings], of Rwandan government critics, both inside and outside Rwanda,” the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada has specifically documented the persecution of RNC members, and British intelligence services have issued at least one warning for the Rwandan government to end its campaign against Rwandans in the United Kingdom. Despite this abundant knowledge at high levels of government, the Rwandan campaign of transnational repression continues, and ordinary Rwandans around the world remain unable to fully enjoy their basic human rights.

All Rwandans are at risk of transnational repression.

Their fear is well-founded: evidence supports the belief that the Rwandan government enlists civilians to target their acquaintances. In 2015, Major Robert Higiro testified before the US Congress that the Rwandan director of military intelligence, Colonel Dan Munyuza, requested that he kill General Kayumba Nyamwasa and Colonel Patrick Karegeya in South Africa, for a fee of $1 million. “That’s the way it works in Rwanda,” he testified. “They look for people they think are vulnerable or weak. If you say no, they track you down and kill you; if you agree, they will eventually kill you too. You have no options.” Higiro played along for a time, while gathering evidence of the plot, before eventually fleeing to Belgium. However, Rwanda apparently managed to find another acquaintance to help carry out the mission; a friend of Karageya’s who ultimately persuaded him to rent the hotel room where he was killed.