

## **INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S NETWORK FOR DEMOCRACY AND PEACE**

### **ABRAHAM KIPLANGAT MUTAI**

**9<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2019, BRUSSELS, BELGIUM**

In 2015 I watched a short documentary on YouTube about atrocities committed in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and I was angered at the regimes of both Museveni and Paul Kagame. But I never took keen interest on the issues in the great lakes Region until 2016 when one of my Kenyan friends who is a journalist at Kass Media International (Levi Kones) was insulted by Paul Kagame on twitter for asking for accountability with regards to Victoire Ingabire's case. I had read about Victoire, and as much as I never agreed with her incarceration I must say I had not taken a keen interest in her case until Paul Kagame insulted my friend and called him "a poor miserable person who has nothing to show for his life". I kept wondering what could have angered a President this much and my curiosity took better of me. I found myself seeking to understand the reasons why Victoire was arrested and I found out that there was more I didn't know about Rwanda's history and that growing up, I was only fed with one side of the story. The official government story. The more I read the materials I could get my hands on, the more I got angered and soon my anger grew into hatred and bitterness of the entire RPF machinery for what they were getting away with. I made it my mission to speak boldly and loudly about these matters around the Great Lakes Region.

In Kenya we have faced tremendous struggle since we gained independence in 1963. Our struggle especially on human rights and new constitution started in 1990 and many individuals were jailed for years. Free speech in Kenya has grown over time though we have not reached where developed nations have reached in as far as their free speech is concerned. Our politics is very dynamic. We have had a vibrant opposition in the country since 1963 and most of us have been born into this reality. The old guards are giving way to young human rights defenders and social justice advocates. The situation in the great lakes region is worrying. But more worrying is the continued human rights violations, forced disappearances and assassinations being carried out either within or without Rwanda by a crazy regime. The regime has inflicted fear among not only its citizens but also among human rights advocates in East Africa. Speaking against the regime is unheard of in East Africa since those who do either are bought out or silenced through any other means possible.

I came to learn that the Incarceration of Victoire Ingabire on trumped up charges is not a new phenomenon in Rwanda. It is what happens to many dissidents and any other person perceived to be opposing the dictatorial regime of Paul Kagame

In 2018 after our general elections that took too long than usual, I embarked on a mission to run a protracted campaign against the regime of Paul Kagame under the clarion call of #FreeEastAfrica and our immediate mission was to generally speak against atrocities committed by regimes across East Africa. With a group of fellow activists, we strongly spoke

against the arrest and detention of Bobi Wine of Uganda. He was later released. I turned my guns to Rwanda and vigorously shook the tenets of a false narrative that has taken root not only in Rwanda but also in the rest of Africa. We spoke against the looting of South Sudan by warlords who live in Nairobi.

In Kenya, we have seen political assassinations, we have seen forced disappearances and we have lived under fear of the state. I chose to speak against the Incarceration of Victoire Ingabire and others because I see myself in her struggle. We relate with her as a country that has undergone tremendous change in human rights advocacy. In Victoire Ingabire we saw a country that is trying to break away from its past demons that have refused to let go. In Victoire Ingabire we saw hope for the rest of the great lakes region. Her courage in the face of state assassins is unmatched. She is a role model to most women in East Africa, she courageously faced jail where others could have cut a deal to save themselves. She opened the way for others like Diane Rwigara.

In the campaigns #FreeDianeRwigara, #FreeVictoireIngabire #FreeMihigoKizito that I personally initiated, brought on board a group of activists from Kenya, others worked behind the scenes and we organized both online (Social media) and offline. The campaign was so intense that it triggered a chain of events that saw the release of Victoire Ingabire, Mihigo Kizito, Diane Rwigara and her Mother. All their charges were later dropped. There was a debate in the US Congress, international media houses such as CNN, BBC carried this story with prominence. Local media houses across Africa also carried this story and it was a continental debate. To save face, Paul Kagame chose to release these political prisoners with over 2000 others.

This campaign was not easy as some may think. We all know what kind of a person Kagame is. I had to reorganize my security. Change my way of life just to remain alive. I was declared Persona non grata in Rwanda and banned from traveling to Kigali. I was offered \$50,000 by people who claimed to be working for the Rwandan Government which I turned down. I was invited on a paid trip to Kigali just to entice me to soften my stance. But I turned this down as well. I speak today boldly because every day I keep telling myself, this is the right thing to do.

It worries me a lot that Africa is not doing fine as far as Human rights and social justice is concerned. Politicians who have refused to vacate power are not making it any easier. We thought that DR Congo after their elections they will have new individuals to forge a new front, open investigations into massacres, stop the plundering of public resources and end civil war, we were wrong. The same people have used a back door to find their way back into government through what they call a coalition government. Ambazonians in Cameroon are crying for help from African nations who have chosen to look the other way and call the killings carried out by the regime, an internal matter. We have literally forgotten the Central Republic of Africa and left them to the dogs. South Sudan is under siege from Warlords who after independence proceeded to loot the poor nation and wage war against innocent citizens. African Union that is led by mostly politicians whose profiles are tainted by blood

have looked the other way while Somalia remain a ghost. Somalilanders have been making their case for recognition for years but African Union has no time to seriously consider and debate their case. Africa we have left the people of Western Sahara to suffer under the regime of Morocco. Abdelaziz Bouteflika, President of Algeria has refused to leave power despite being incapacitated. He wants to die in power. Yoweri Museveni thinks that he only can rule Uganda. Ali Bongo, Gabon President, has impoverished his country so much such that he seeks treatment abroad and recuperates in a nearby country. He can't even recuperate in his own country. Africa has been plundered. Africa is bleeding. The continent is bleeding. Crying for help.

This is part of the reasons why I decided to speak on issues across Africa. We are one people with artificial borders imposed on us by our colonial masters. While all Indians are one nation, all Chinese one nation, all Russians one nation and Americans one nation, we have chosen to hate on one another based on artificial colonial borders. An African in South Africa has nothing different from an African in Togo, Rwanda and Kenya except the artificial boundary creating tiny African nations.

One of the biggest challenge we face in Africa as Human Rights advocates is funding. Most African Governments are dictatorial regimes who do not fancy any opposition especially from Human rights activists. The African governments are always working tirelessly to completely cripple social justice activists. Our jobs are taken away, our businesses are frustrated by government and most time Human rights activists find themselves between a rock and a hard place. They have to constantly make a choice between quitting social justice movement for the sake of their families or continue in the movement and suffer. The importance of moral and financial support for the movement in Africa cannot be overemphasized

Apart from financial challenges, security of social justice activists in Africa is another challenge. Social Justice defenders are disappeared, killed or even jailed. These are challenges that we must face and live with in Africa if we have to continue speaking and advocating for change. No one said it was going to be easy.

I want to thank my fellow Kenyans and citizens of East Africa who have joined me to boldly speak on issues across Africa. Whenever we initiate a campaign, it is their support that ensures that politicians and dictators listen to our demands. Their voices have been heard across the continent. Special mention here includes Mr Robert Alai and Mr Boniface Mwangi, keep the fight, they both used their influence online to speak boldly and loudly about the atrocities committed in Rwanda. I want to thank Peter Mutabaruka and Claude Gatebuke for being my new friends from the great lakes region. They have shown great humility and dedication to this quest. I want to thank International Women's Network for democracy and peace for giving me this award today. I know there are other people out there doing much more than I have done. I'm humbled by this opportunity.

As such I want to dedicate this award to the people of East Africa especially Kenya, colleagues in my place of work and most importantly my wife. She knows the dangers of this work but she supported me all through. There are those who have ridiculed my work, she

has stood by me. To my wife, thank you, you are a strong woman, I wouldn't ask for more. I love you so much.

Thank you all, and may God bless the people of the great continent of Africa!