

31 May 2016

## **Rwanda – Human rights defender Epimack Kwokwo declared *persona non grata* in Rwanda and expelled from the country**

On 28 May 2016, human rights defender Mr **Epimack Kwokwo** was summoned to a Rwandan immigration office in Kigali where he was declared *persona non grata* in Rwanda. He was shown a letter announcing this decision, signed by the Director General of Immigration, and promptly driven to the border between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). After several formalities where officials returned Epimack Kwokwo's passport that they have held since October 2015, immigration authorities facilitated his crossing to the DRC.

Epimack Kwokwo is the acting Executive Secretary of *La ligue des droits de la personne dans la région des Grands Lacs – LDGL* (League for the defence of human rights in the Great Lakes region), an umbrella organisation based in the Great Lakes region which unites twenty-five member human rights organizations in Rwanda, Burundi and the DRC. The organisation has served as a focal point for the protection of human rights defenders in Rwanda and has worked with victims of human rights violations across the region, seeking to guarantee their safety.

On the morning of 27 May 2016, Epimack Kwokwo was interviewed for three hours at a Rwandan immigration office about the LDGL and his permission to work in Rwanda. The human rights defender is originally from the DRC. Immigration authorities told him he would need to pay a sum of \$800 USD to cover the cost of his work permit and a fine on the work permit. Having left the immigration office early in the day, Epimack Kwokwo received a phone call at 18:30 from an immigration officer named Moses who told him that he needed to appear at the immigration office the following morning, 28 May 2016, before 8 am.

On 28 May 2016, Epimack Kwokwo arrived at the immigration office at 7:20 am. Shortly afterwards the immigration officer, Moses, came to discuss the situation with the human rights defender. He made him aware that the Director General of Immigration was not available, and he had a letter for the human rights defender. At 9 am, the letter was presented to Epimack Kwokwo with the announcement of his status as *persona non grata* in Rwanda and his subsequent expulsion. The decision is based on Article 13 of the law governing immigration and emigration in Rwanda even though he is not contravening any articles of that law. Article 13 on "The procedure regarding foreign workers" states that all foreign workers in Rwanda must have a valid work permit, however the human rights defender was expelled before time allowed for him to pay the aforementioned fee for his work permit. At 10 am the human rights defender was put in a car with three immigration officials and a driver. He was driven from Kigali to the Rwandan border with the DRC at the Rusizi river. Immigration officials returned Epimack Kwokwo's passport, and facilitated his border crossing to the DRC.

The human rights defender was not notified prior to his expulsion of the ruling against him, thus he was not able to collect belongings from his home or notify his family of the situation. Upon arrival in the DRC, Epimack Kwokwo was without essential items such as his telephone, which had been confiscated before the journey from Kigali to the border crossing.

Since September 2015, when a coalition of organisations in Rwanda, including *LDGL*, compiled information as part of Rwanda's 2015 Universal Periodic Review (UPR), Epimack Kwokwo has been targeted by Rwandan immigration officials as they perceive him to be a key actor in the writing of the report by civil society. The report by civil society, as part of Rwanda's 2015 UPR, contained information that 'framed Rwanda in a bad light' as Rwandan officials have communicated to the human rights defender. Epimack Kwokwo has been the target of [detention](#), [harassment and threats](#) from immigration officials who have attempted to force him out of Rwanda.

Front Line Defenders believes that the expulsion of human rights defender, Epimack Kwokwo, from Rwanda is directly linked to his work in the defence of human rights, particularly his engagement with different civil society organisations including *LDGL* to contribute to the 2015 Rwandan UPR. Front Line Defenders is seriously concerned for the psychological integrity of the defender and his family who have been forced to re-locate without notice to the DRC from Rwanda. Front Line Defenders recognizes a pattern in Rwanda in which human rights defenders are repeatedly targeted and prohibited from conducting their work.

**Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Rwanda to:**

1. Immediately and unconditionally retract its decision against Epimack Kwokwo and ensure that he may resume his legitimate and peaceful work in defence of human rights without any restrictions;
2. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Rwanda are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.