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Public Statement

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Rwanda: Human rights organisation forced to close down

Last Friday, the leading Rwandese human rights organisation, *La Ligue Rwandaise pour la Promotion et la Défense des Droits de l'Homme* (LIPRODHOR), closed its doors. All its employees are temporarily suspended, a suspension that will become permanent if donors are not found before March 2005.

LIPRODHOR was the only independent human rights organisation in Rwanda that maintained human rights monitors at the provincial and district levels. The organisation's expected demise means that Rwandese, particularly those in rural areas, will no longer have an independent human rights monitor to either record or attempt to resolve their human rights complaints.

Without resorting to the criminal judicial system, the government has effectively destroyed one of the remaining human rights pillars of Rwandese civil society.

The expected closure of LIPRODHOR follows a well-known pattern for human rights organisations in Rwanda. In the case of LIPRODHOR, parliamentary commissions have, on two occasions in March 2003 and June 2004, made vague and unsubstantiated allegations regarding their "divisionist" and/or "genocidal" activities. In the Rwanda of today where one's innocence rather than one's guilt has to be proven, such allegations are usually sufficient to effectively blacklist the organisation or individual. Such organisations find it nearly impossible to hire and retain staff or raise funds. Following the release of the more recent parliamentary commission's report, the organisation's assets were temporarily frozen and several key LIPRODHOR staff sought asylum abroad.

In mid-September, the government acknowledged the parliamentary report and embarked on a two-pronged action strategy: judicial investigation and self-criticism. LIPRODHOR was obliged to investigate its staff and root out individuals for their "bad behaviour". The organisation had to pay 20,000 USD, 80 percent of its financial reserves, for this internal investigation. Their report reproduced parliament's incriminating findings as well as depleted its financial reserves. LIPRODHOR personnel and members decried the biased, politically manipulated nature of the report but the organisation was told by the government to take action on the allegations contained in it. Individuals named in the internal investigation, like in the Commission's report, were never questioned or provided with the opportunity to respond to the allegations made against them.

Background

A parliamentary commission was established in January 2004 to investigate the assassination of several genocide survivors in Gikongoro province and the prevalence within Rwanda of a genocidal ideology. The Commission presented its report to the National Assembly in June. The Commission recommended the dissolution of five non-governmental organisations, including LIPRODHOR. The national assembly quickly accepted the Commission's recommendations. The Rwandese government did not respond until

mid-September when it congratulated parliament for its work. Its spokesperson stated that the report had alerted the government to the scope and scale of what it characterised as "ethnic divisionism" and a "genocidal ideology". The government stated it would turn the situation over to the criminal justice system and to the organisations (and individuals) named in the Commission report to remedy.