

Enforced Disappearance in Rwanda: Noel Zihabamwe, the Australian Human Rights Institute and Corrs Chambers Westgarth

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Enforced disappearances have been reported in Rwanda since the Rwandan Patriotic Front came to power in 1994. In 2020, as part of its Summer Clerk Pro Bono Project, Corrs volunteered to support Mr Noel Zihabamwe and the Australian Human Rights Institute (AHRI) in relation to the enforced disappearance of Mr Zihabamwe's two brothers in Rwanda.

Mr Zihabamwe is a genocide survivor who came to Australia on a humanitarian visa, the founder and Chairperson of the African Australian Advocacy Centre and a member of the advisory committee of the AHRI. After refusing to act as an agent of influence in Australia for the Kagame regime, Mr Zihabamwe and his family faced increased harassment and intimidation in Australia and Rwanda. After anonymously reporting the harassment to the ABC, his brothers in Rwanda were targeted by police, forced off a bus and have not been seen since. The Rwandan state and authorities continue to deny knowledge of or involvement in the disappearance and have instead sought to further harass and intimidate Mr Zihabamwe and his family.

Corrs has worked with leading human rights barrister Jennifer Robinson, to file a number of complaints to the UN Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances (including reprisals complaints) and Mr Zihabamwe and the team addressed the working group in its February 2022 session.

The team has also run a media and political advocacy strategy to raise awareness, foster support and encourage confrontation of enforced disappearance issues, in political fora. Given the publicity, this strategy has also sought to provide some security against further reprisals.

Before Corrs was involved, Mr Zihabamwe had limited courses of action which included making public statements and approaching the police and Australian MPs, and seeking help from relatives and friends in Rwanda. The progress in the search for his brothers was hampered by the limitations of domestic remedies, complications relating to diplomatic immunity and the harassment and intimidation that both he and



Mr Noel Zihabamwe

his family members experienced in response to public statements.

Corrs and AHRI's involvement secured Mr Zihabamwe's representation by a leading human rights barrister and enabled him to engage international law mechanisms. The team hopes this important work will not only lead to finding Mr Zihabamwe's brothers, but provide opportunities for Rwanda to resolve other disappearances and address systemic human rights abuses. ■

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