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Uganda

Response to Information Request Number:	UGA03001.DEN
Date:	December 11, 2002
Subject:	Uganda: Information on the Human Rights Group Known as "Human Rights Africa/Uganda"
From:	INS Resource Information Center
Keywords:	Uganda / Elections / Grassroots organizations / Human rights commissions / Human rights legislation / Human rights monitoring / Human rights workers / NGOs / Political participation / Promotion of human rights

Query:

Please provide information on the existence of a human rights group based in Kampala, Uganda, known as "Human Rights Africa/Uganda." Also please provide information on the group's activities and whether members of the group or human rights activists in general are at risk of harm by the Ugandan government.

Response:

No reference has been found to an organization named Human Rights Africa/Uganda in reports from human rights organizations, Department of State human rights reports, media articles, or through an extensive Internet search. The organization is not one of sixteen groups making up the Uganda Human Rights Network (known as HURINET or HURINET-U [Uganda]) (Univ. of Sussex, "Human Rights Advocacy Groups," n.d.). Other sources put the number of member groups in the umbrella human rights organization at twenty-five (Connect International, n.d.).

The executive director of the Foundation for Human Rights Initiative (FHRI), Livingstone Sewanyana, based in Kampala, Uganda, stated: "we have tried to establish the legitimacy of "Human Rights Africa/Uganda" and to our current information, we have no knowledge of

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its existence or its work in the country" (Sewanyana 11 Dec. 2002). FHRI is "an independent, non-profit organisation committed to the protection and promotion of human rights and democracy in Uganda." It was founded in December 1991 (FHRI n.d.).

There is a Ugandan human rights organization with a similar name and initials that could possibly give rise to confusion. This is the Uganda Human Rights Activists (UHRA). UHRA was founded by Ugandans in exile in Sweden in 1982, began work in Uganda in 1985 (Univ. of Sussex, "Human Rights Advocacy Groups," n.d.), and works to "create awareness and promote respect for human rights in Uganda" (Univ. of Minnesota, June 1996). It reportedly went into decline following the arrest of its founder and Secretary-General Mr. Sera Muwanga, who later fled into exile and died in 1999. The Human Rights Education Association provided the following information on UHRA in 1997:

UGANDA HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS (UHRA) Plot 10B Buganda Road P.O. Box 8972 Kampala UGANDA (Tel) +256 41 258156 contact person: J.R.M. Kasibante type of programmes: HR monitoring; HR awareness through newsletter and 'Know Your Rights' booklets; seminar, workshops and paralegal training courses; human rights clubs in schools and institutes of higher learning; legal aid target groups: secondary school and university students; paralegals; general public countries: Uganda (HREA 1997).

TREATMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS BY THE UGANDAN GOVERNMENT

The overall situation of human rights in Uganda was characterized as "poor" in the 2001 U.S. Department of State human rights report:

"... [T]here continued to be numerous, serious problems. Movement [Uganda's ruling party] domination of the political process limited the right of citizens to change their government. Security forces used excessive force, at times resulting in death, and committed or failed to prevent some extrajudicial killings of suspected rebels and civilians. Security forces killed and injured several persons while intervening in clashes between supporters of different political candidates" (USDOS 4 Mar. 2002).

Amnesty International pointed to "growing restrictions on freedom of association, movement and expression" in the country: "The lack of fundamental freedoms in Uganda for people who have expressed views that are opposite to those of the government follows an increasingly evident pattern of repression and intimidation" (AI 14 Sept. 2001).

The US Department of State reported in their last annual report that the situation of human rights groups and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) appears to have improved in recent years.

"A number of domestic and international human rights groups generally operate without

government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials generally were responsive to their views" (USDOS 4 Mar. 2002).

Human Rights Watch reported on an increased willingness of human rights groups to monitor and advocate on human rights—as opposed to focusing largely on educational activities—and linked this, at least in part, to the fact that the government “is willing to allow some monitoring of sensitive human rights issues such as abuses by the army and security organizations” (HRW Dec. 1999).

An important human rights development in Uganda has been the creation of the Uganda Human Rights Commission (UHRC) to investigate rights violations in the country. The Department of State reported in 2001:

"The Constitution established the UHRC as a permanent independent body with quasi-judicial powers. Under the Constitution, the UHRC may subpoena information and order the release of detainees and the payment of compensation for abuses. The UHRC continued to pursue suspected human rights abusers, including high-level officials in the Government and military, and expanded its operations by opening a second branch office in Soroti district in September" (USDOS 23 Feb. 2001).

By June 2001, the UHRC had handled over 4,000 complaints related to human rights violations since its inception in 1996 (New Vision 10 June 2001).

However, despite apparent improvements in the general climate for human rights groups in Uganda, a significant barrier to their freedom of operation has been the government's requirement that non-governmental groups register and be “nonsectarian and nonpolitical.” Human Rights Watch reported in 2000:

"Government continues to control civil society groups through the manipulation of their registration, requiring NGOs to be nonsectarian and nonpolitical. The government continues to refuse to register the Uganda National NGO Forum, a broad consortium of national and foreign NGOs, and declared its May 1999 second general assembly "unlawful." NGOs groups [sic] with ties to political organizations, such as the Foundation for African Development, faced frequent harassment and interference with their seminars and public events" (HRW Dec. 1999).

In 2002, Human Rights Watch reported:

"[A] draft law, the Nongovernmental Organizations Registration (Amendment) Bill, would require that NGOs obtain a special permit from the registration board before they could operate. It would also increase the registration board's powers to reject or revoke an NGO's registration; and it would stiffen the penalties for operating without official sanction,

potentially criminalizing legitimate NGO activities" (HRW 2002).

Prior to the March 2001 presidential election, repression against human rights groups, particularly those that appeared to be linked to the political opposition, was more overt. Human Rights Watch reported that a "series of four seminars on the topic of 'Human Rights and Democracy,' sponsored by the Foundation for African Development (FAD) and the Uganda Young Democrats (UYD), were broken up by police," with six participants injured on one occasion, and participants at a seminar being whipped by police on another (HRW Dec. 1999). In the period since the elections, the limitations on the activities of human rights groups appear to have been more bureaucratic in nature, and further examples of direct repression of groups or their members have not been found. In response to a question regarding whether human rights activists in Uganda are at risk of harm by the Ugandan government, Livingstone Sewanyana, executive director of the Foundation for Human Rights Initiative (FHRI), stated: "Whereas human rights violations occur and occasional interferences by the state are recorded, at the moment we cannot generalise that human rights activists are at risk of harm from the Uganda government" (Sewanyana 11 Dec. 2002).

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RIC within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

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