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May 25, 2021

Adam Silver  
Commissioner  
National Basketball Association  
*Via email*

Dear Mr. Silver,

The Human Rights Foundation (HRF) welcomes the National Basketball Association's (NBA) expansion to Africa with last week's launch of the inaugural season (May 16-30) of the highly anticipated [Basketball Africa League](#) (BAL), especially after more than one year of [postponements](#) caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

We commend the positive impact the BAL can have on local economies, and on growing and developing local talent. **However, we are writing today to express grave concern about the NBA's partnership with the government of Rwanda, which is hosting the inaugural BAL season in the capital city, Kigali, and in particular, the League's growing relationship with Rwandan dictator and warmonger Paul Kagame.** We believe that Kagame will use the prestige of the NBA to whitewash his crimes, and to give his regime the false appearance of legitimacy and stability.

The NBA has [articulated](#) its passion for "growing and celebrating the game of basketball" while being "deeply committed to social responsibility," notably through the [NBA Cares](#) global social responsibility program.

And yet, despite this commitment to supporting just causes, the NBA's chosen partner in Africa is Paul Kagame, a former warlord, who achieved the stability and development credited to him by engaging in atrocities that United Nations investigators have described as war crimes, crimes against humanity, and possibly genocide.

According to investigative reports by UN human rights experts, Kagame's regime is involved in [launching two wars](#) into neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) that caused the deaths of more than 5 million people and stand as the bloodiest conflicts since World War II, the [massacre](#) of tens of thousands of innocent civilians in [Rwanda](#) and [DRC](#), including women, children, and refugees, and the financing of brutal militias involved in the [illegal plunder](#) of precious minerals. Rwandans both in their country and abroad who express criticism of the Kagame government, routinely end up either intimidated, jailed, killed,

or forcibly disappeared. Most recently, the Rwandan government abducted Paul Rusesabagina, the real life hotel manager whose heroism in saving hundreds of people from the genocide was portrayed in the 2004 Oscar-nominated film *Hotel Rwanda*.

What's more, Kagame's military incursions in the DRC have personally scarred and upended the lives of several members of the NBA family: particularly Congolese-born players who have played in the NBA. For example, Lakers retired center DJ Mbenga's [father was killed](#) in the turmoil following Kagame's launch of a military invasion of the DRC in 1997. Former Utah Jazz guard [Emmanuel Mudiay](#) was still an infant at the time, but his older brothers [have shared](#) how they are still haunted by the horrors of Kagame's invasion, including the terror of hearing gunfire at night, seeing charred or bullet-riddled corpses, and the fear when a stray bullet smashed through a window in their house and injured a family member.

### **Why is the NBA associating with a warmonger responsible for massacres and destruction that turned millions of people into refugees?**

Like other dictators, Kagame is seeking to exploit the prestige of your brand to distract from his dreadful history of crimes and ongoing brutal repression. As recently as last week, Kagame claimed that "[no crimes were committed](#)" in eastern DRC and sought to discredit the work of UN human rights investigators. Hosting the BAL in Rwanda, and continuing to praise him [as you did in 2018](#) at the launch of the Giants of Africa camp, lends his regime legitimacy and gives it the appearance of stability and openness. Given your stated values, we believe that you have the responsibility not to be in league with Kagame and his government.

We therefore urgently and respectfully request your office to:

- Begin a dialogue with current or former NBA players whose lives have been directly affected by the devastation, death, and destruction perpetrated by Kagame's regime and its allies: for example, [Emmanuel Mudiay](#).
- Explicitly make clear that any business relationship with the Rwandan government is not an endorsement of Kagame's regime. While we commend the NBA supporting the development of professional basketball in Rwanda, the League should ensure that its investments benefit the people of Rwanda and follow the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#).
- Host future BAL seasons in countries not ruled by murderous warlords.
- Re-evaluate the NBA's relationship with Kagame. You must make a categorical and unequivocal public statement addressing your position on these matters.

Basketball fans in Rwanda, Africa, and across the world look to the NBA for leadership and inspiration. We urge you to deny the Kagame regime the opportunity to use your global influence to whitewash its warmongering, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and illegal plunder of natural resources.



If you have any questions, you can contact us at (212) 246-8486 or by replying to this e-mail.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Thor Halvorssen".

Thor Halvorssen  
CEO and President  
Human Rights Foundation