

May 4, 2015

H.E Senator Mike Enzi
Chair Senate Budget Committee
624 Dirksen Office Building
Washington, DC 20510



Dear Senator Enzi,

We are the Catholic Task Force for Africa (CTFA), a coalition of Catholic religious orders, organizations and individuals committed to advocating for peace, justice, good governance, conflict prevention, reconciliation, religious freedom and development in Africa.

Members of CTFA have recently learned the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) has proposed to cut all funding for Voice of America's Central Africa Service Kirundi/Kinyarwanda Program in the Fiscal Year 2016 budget. This program reaches listeners not only in Rwanda and Burundi, but also in eastern D.R. Congo, Uganda, Zambia, Tanzania and Kenya. There are over 31 million inhabitants who speak or understand both languages in Rwanda and Burundi alone. ***VOA Kirundi/Kinyarwanda is an important foreign policy tool and an essential voice in a region where media sources are often repressed. It should not be cut.***

If the US claims to pursue democracy building and conflict prevention as key foreign policy goals in the Great Lakes Region, why cut off the practical means to do so? As an accessible radio station communicating in native languages, VOA Kirundi/Kinyarwanda is an important tool in achieving these goals the region. "Too often, the international community – including the United States – has zeroed in on the Great Lakes during times of extreme crisis, only to vacate the region after the slightest sign of progress," says former Presidential Special Envoy to the Great Lakes Region and Senator Russ Feingold during a recent talk at the U.S. Institute for Peace.

International media options in local languages are dropping like flies. The Rwandan government just suspended Gahuza, a Kinyarwanda British media outlet, and also refused to renew the contract of Deutsche Welle, a long-standing German radio relay station. The government in neighboring Burundi shut down the popular African Public Radio in April during public protests demanding that President Pierre Nkurunziza respect the constitutional presidential term limit. VOA Kirundi/Kinyarwanda services are crucial, now more than ever, for unrestricted and objective news and programming. ***When looking for places to cut funding, the US government should examine money sent to oppressive governments in the region before suggesting that a (comparatively very economical) radio station be closed.***

VOA Kirundi/Kinyarwanda Service is a leader in providing impartial news. It is an empowering and stabilizing force in a region where freedom of the press is restricted by regional governments. Without transparency, reports from VOA are often the sole catalyst in encouraging leaders to act on political and social issues. Without VOA, radio information could be limited to local competing political forces and extremist voices. Wealthy, more educated people may still be able

to access news in foreign languages without VOA, but poorer citizens' access to information will be severely impaired, thus increasing inequality and cause for conflict.

During and after the Rwandan genocide, the civil war in Burundi, the Rwandan and Ugandan invasion of the D.R. Congo, and the multiple rebellion groups which followed this conflicted period, VOA offered (1) an alternative narrative to strengthen peace, democratic institutions and civic participation, (2) content about the root causes and consequences of these wars to help people form educated opinions and (3) an understanding of American democratic society, guiding economic principles and information about U.S policy in the region.

In summary, the U.S. Congress should reverse the BBG's proposal, and continue funding the VOA Kirundi/Kinyarwanda Program which provides reliable news and promotes peace, unity and objectivity in a region which truly needs it.

As Americans we treasure the rights to freedom of speech and press: shutting down VOA is against our expressed values and bad for US foreign policy in Africa.

Funding VOA means extremist propaganda and hate media don't get free reign in a region without the voice of VOA. It denies heavy-handed governments the monopoly of information, a favorite tool in the arsenal of a dictator to maintain power and quash civil society voices. There are better ways to trim a few dollars from the FY2016 Budget rather than silence this powerful instrument of freedom, unity and empowerment.

We wish you God's blessings and guidance in your work.

Sincerely,

Rev. Aniedi Okure, OP
For Catholic Task Force for Africa

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