

EU Human Rights Defenders Award Ceremony

1 June 2022

Good afternoon and welcome at the Belgian residence. It is a pleasure to be hosting this 2022 ceremony where we issue the EU Human Rights Defenders award. We do this every year, together with the Embassies of the EU Member States and EU Delegation and the Embassy of Norway.

2022 marks the eleventh year in a row that we present this award in Uganda. It is given for significant contributions to human rights. The award recognizes the courage and determination of human rights defenders, who work often in very difficult circumstances. It also gives increased visibility to their work in Uganda. Since 2012, the EU award went to Ugandans working in many areas: freedom of expression, child protection, women's rights, rights of disabled people and environmental rights. These are all universal rights that should be upheld and respected by all.

Nevertheless, human rights challenges continue to exist in Uganda and those challenges cannot and should not be ignored. Progress is urgently needed to ensure that everyone in this country has their human rights respected, protected and fulfilled regardless of their age, ethnicity, gender or political affiliation.

Over the past months, the European Union has voiced concern about persistence in Uganda of torture. It also expressed concern for other human right violations in Uganda such as the excessive use of force by security agents, violations to freedom of expression and the media, including harassment, threats, illegal detentions and violence against journalists and human rights defenders. It has called upon Ugandan authorities to hold all perpetrators of human rights violations to account and personally liable for their actions.

Respecting human rights is a collective effort. The State and its authorities need to take part in this effort. The EU has been vocal about the role of the Ugandan State. In January, during the United Nations Universal Periodic Review in Geneva, EU Member States clearly raised concern about the violations mentioned earlier. In April, the EU Special Representative on Human Rights, Eamon Gilmore, visited Uganda and had frank discussions about the worrying state of human rights in Uganda with a wide range of public officials, including Members of Parliament, Ministers and the President. He publicly condemned rights abuses by security forces and called upon the President to take action.

Far too often, some of the victims of violations are compensated during the process. Action by the government then stops there. More action is needed, and the state agents responsible for violations need to be properly held accountable, in particular the leading state agents. We have so far seen none of this. EU Member States will continue to have these difficult conversations. We stand ready to have a dialogue and to work with everyone in this country to chart a pathway to a situation of greater respect for human rights and a brighter future for all Ugandans.

The work of human rights defenders is essential to promote and protect human rights. Therefore, I am happy to report that the response to our call for nominations for the award was again very strong this year. We received 85 eligible nominations for the award and the standard of people nominated was again very high. It was a difficult process for our teams to narrow this down to just three people.

Now, it is my pleasure to introduce to you, in alphabetical order, the three nominees for the EU Human Rights Defenders Award 2022.

Eron Kiiza is a lawyer and an advocate at the High Court of Uganda. In 2021 his work featured prominently in Uganda, in particular because of the high profile cases he took on to defend Human Rights activist Nicholas Opiyo and novelist Kakwenza Rukira-Bashaija. His work shows that Eron Kiiza is persistent to defend Human Rights, often at great personal risk, and does not shy away to defend the rights of Ugandans who are suffering reprisal for their dissenting views. This is particularly acknowledged by the European Union who has condemned, as mentioned earlier, the human rights violations Eron Kiiza has sought to attack in court. Besides, Eron Kiiza led a campaign last year against the continued degradation of Bugoma Forest, which generated public and legal pressure against Hoima Sugar Company. The restoration of Uganda's biodiversity as well as the protection of environmental rights of all Ugandan citizens are also important priorities for the EU Delegation and European missions in Uganda.

Primah Kwagala is a human rights lawyer and Executive Director of Woman's Probono Initiative, an organization that defends woman and girls in Uganda against violence and discrimination. Through her organization, she provides legal services in defense of the rights of the most vulnerable woman in Uganda. During the covid lock-down, Primah stood up for the rights of woman who were unfairly put in prison for breaking curfews. Moreover, she advocated for government cash transfers to support woman who lost their jobs. Under Primah's leadership Woman's Probono Initiative has also been able to repatriate several Ugandan women who were victims of trafficking in the Middle East.

The EU is conscious that women in Uganda face numerous challenges, including gender and sexual related violence, violation of land and property rights, and equal access of girls to education. The covid pandemic has further exacerbated this situation. Therefore the European Union and Norway support continued efforts to address these challenges.

Kayinga Muddu Yisto, is coordinator of Community Transformation Foundation Network (COTFONE) which strives for equal access to basic services and Human Rights protection in Greater Masaka. Kayinga has been working at the grassroots level to raise the voices of local communities and empower them to fight poverty and stand up for their rights. The past year, Kayinga has been particularly active on advocating on behalf of local communities affected by the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP). At great personal risk, he speaks out publicly about the violation of rights of persons affected by EACOP and helps them to seek redress. The European Union and Norway have been following the oil and gas exploration and exploitation in Uganda with great interest. Like my colleague and friend Richard Nelson, director of USAID stressed last week: the oil exploitation should benefit all Ugandans, not just some. Although these projects fall under the responsibility of the Government of Uganda, European missions insist they respect international standards as well as the rights of affected local communities. In this sense, the European Union commends the work of civil society who are instrumental in voicing concern and instigating dialogue to address human rights violations.

I am delighted to say that all nominees are with us today, except for Kayinga who had already committed to attend other business abroad. Nevertheless, he is represented this afternoon by Florence Nakandi. As you could hear, we have three outstanding candidates, each of whom would merit winning the award. But unfortunately, only one person can win.

The winner of the EU Human Rights Defenders Award 2022 is ... Primah Kwagala! Congratulations. Please come up here so that I can hand over the award.

[Presentation of award]

I will now give the opportunity to the winner to say a few words.

[Short speech by Primah]

Thank you Primah and congratulations again. This closes the award ceremony. Thank you everyone for being here today. Please enjoy the reception.