

SURELY THE FINAL SAY CANNOT BE IN NEW YORK

- **Grace Kwinjeh**

That Human Rights Watch, Executive Director, Kenneth Roth, was insensitive to the people of Rwanda at their time of mourning, during the 15th Commemoration of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, is an inescapable conclusion.

At the time Roth penned his article (The power of horror in Rwanda), world leaders, celebrities, the diplomatic community, churches, name them; were caught in a serious moment of deep grief.

Roth and HRW have taken a political position on Rwanda, which is fine, but they must not masquerade this as a human rights crusade, because it is not.

Consequently, diminishing Roth's moral authority as his rigid position is inimical to the spirit of human rights activism, if the strategy is based on the notion of exclusivity and his word being final.

They have become the citadel of the human rights cause, into which no one else can enter unless in the circumstantial event of being defined as a violator of those rights or merely as a victim.

This is the scenario to the background of a cause that spans decades; one which has its heroes in the form of our immortal Gandhi, to the present day fighters our own Shero Aung Sang Suu Kyi, who has fought for decades in a cause that will benefit many – but over which none of us claims exclusivity.

There are many more such altruistic heroes and sheroes and here in Rwanda, we can name and celebrate, those who stood up to the challenge of rescuing a nation from total annihilation. Those who took up the challenge of picking up the pieces and re-building the country, getting it to where it is today.

The evolution of the human rights discourse led to consensus on fundamental principles, that shape the core values of our common humanity as enshrined in several declarations and protocols, among them being the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

These were not authored in someone's back garden, and should not be abused as a stick to whip those who fall out of line with those who have given themselves, the duty of being overseer/executor.

It defeats both the historic and current purpose, the reason for the quagmire we are in today, in global politics. This is why international solidarity around the human rights cause is fast weakening, international NGO's have taken over and with the might and capacity of enormous resources they drive the agenda, with very little participation of those they claim to represent.

As I have written before and I repeat; no one has an exclusive right to the interpretation of the rights agenda, we are all stakeholders, and reserve the right to claim that space; even more so the right to champion our cause, to be heard and lastly to be understood.

If we say this is how political violence happened in Zimbabwe, hear us, understand us. Likewise hear those who have a story to tell of the Rwandan Genocide.

Many of us have suffered forms of abuse in one way or another, some worse than others, it is simply nauseating when a group of self-serving individuals gives itself the right to interpret our pain, our anguish.

By silencing those of us who have alternative views to their own, Roth and crew are in the process creating the very institutions, rigid, dictatorial ones - that reinforce the very notions they claim to fight.

Interesting though is that part of an article I wrote on the Genocide commemorations has been posted on the HRW site, with a little note that I work for the editorial team of *The New Times*. That I work for *The New Times*, is no secret it is on our website, www.newtimes.co.rw.

For the record, I manage the editorial team of *The New Times*, my official post being Managing Editor, the paper I work for being a private publication with nothing to do with the Government of Rwanda. I am proud to be part of a historical process in the building a truly, dynamic, diverse media in Rwanda.

Roth cannot be allowed to sit in an ivory tower somewhere in New York, to spew out such arrogance, and expect us to take it quietly.

It is a negation of our Ubuntu, our dignity, for we did not liberate ourselves from slavery, colonialism, dictatorship, only to be subjugated by someone who thinks he understands us better.

It is therefore total rubbish when I speak out as a young black woman somewhere in eastern Africa, having earned the right to opine in the debate arena of human rights, that I am descended upon with the ferocious might of an enraged animal - -my voice stifled, my beliefs attacked.

As a human rights activist of many years, I will not brag about what I have suffered, or lost in the process, but will declare open disdain for the kind of arrogance, and if not abuse in the way those who claim to champion my cause approach things.

In my situation, even more ridiculous is when my former tormentor Robert Mugabe is given a standing ovation, at President Jacob Zuma's inauguration, by progressive men and women.

Many who have been the most strident fighters of the rights cause during the anti-apartheid struggle. How then does such a noble cause lose flavour? For these people are not cheering Mugabe's crimes, but sadly, his stand against people like Roth. Take it or leave it this is what deception and double standards in the human rights discourse breeds.

If Roth as Executive Director of what is esteemed to be an institution that champions the rights of all citizens around the world, descends so low as to pour hot oil on the wounds of mourning Rwandans, what can stop any other activist from thinking – Mmm, perhaps Mugabe has a point?

When he fails to practice what he preaches, how much more value can his cause be worth? Nothing. Why are more than a 100 hundred Latin American civic organizations refusing to be cowed by HRW, challenging The report titled: "A Decade Under Chávez: Political Intolerance and Lost Opportunities for Advancing Human Rights in Venezuela"?

The report is criticised by the group of experts that it: "does not meet even the most minimal standards of scholarship, impartiality, accuracy, or credibility."

While the petitions by the civic groups, activists, have not been published on the HRW website, some of the esteemed petitioners include; Noam Chomsky, Professor of Linguistics, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Bill Fletcher, Jr., Executive Editor, BlackCommentator.com, Deborah Levenson, Professor of History, Boston College, and Chilean journalist Frida Modak, among other esteemed persons. I continue.