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**“Protecting Civil Society, Faith-Based Actors, and Political Speech In
Sub-Saharan Africa”**

House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health and Human Rights

*Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ), Chairman
Opening Statement
May 9, 2018*

Good afternoon. Our hearing this afternoon will explore U.S policy responses to the growing trend of government incursions on the space for non-state actors in Sub-Saharan Africa. As authoritarian regimes and backsliding democracies have entrenched themselves in countries such as Sudan, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi, governments have increasingly encroached upon the mediating space between individuals and the state, particularly against religious groups and journalists, who often stand as independent institutional checks to authoritarian rule.

Protecting non-governmental sector in Sub-Saharan Africa is critical to preserving civil and political rights within the region. As we learned from the U.S civil rights movement, groups such as churches and independent journalists are the safekeepers of civil liberties. Through sanctions and public diplomacy tools, the international community can protect the space for these safe-keepers to operate in Sub-Saharan Africa.

For example, the Catholic Church in the Democratic Republic of Congo is the only organization with a nationwide institutional presence and moral authority capable of checking Kabila's growing authoritarian rule. The National Episcopal Conference of the Congo (*CENCO, per its French acronym*) is the only civil society institution that pressures the Kabila regime to respect human rights and democratic principles. CENCO mediated the Saint Sylvester political agreement in 2016. It also oversees the Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace (CEJP) which conducts voter-education and election-observer training programs and is a recipient of USAID funding, and has expressed "moral support" for pro-democracy protests.

The Catholic Church's leadership in the Congo does not come without a cost. Priests, nuns and parishioners have been targeted, attacked, and killed in retaliation for its leadership. A few months ago, Father Sébastien Yebo, parish priest of St. Robert in an outer eastern suburb of Kinshasa, was abducted by Congolese security forces. Interviewed on RFI radio, Father Joseph Bema from St. Kisito's parish said he has rarely slept at home since the brutal suppression of the protest marches organized by the Lay Coordination Committee on Jan. 21.

The closing of space for faith based organizations and other civil society organizations is a worrying trend in a number of Sub-Saharan African countries. Humanitarian aid workers, journalists, priests and political candidates (and their families), have been increasingly targeted and threatened by governments in Sub-Saharan Africa.

If we look north of the DRC, we can see that in South Sudan, a country I visited twice since its independence, we see humanitarian organizations are harassed by government forces. Last year, humanitarian organizations reported over 700 cases of humanitarian access incidents. The environment for humanitarian operations grows increasingly difficult and dangerous as the geographic scope of humanitarian need continues to expand. South Sudan currently have over 1.7million IDPs.

There is also growing concern throughout the region on the closing of independent and objective media sources. Most recently, Burundi suspended Voice of America and BBC earlier this week for a period of six months,

according to the announcement made at a press conference by the Conseil Nationale de la Communication (CNC). The CNC claims that this suspension is in response to “biased reporting.” This suspension comes two weeks before a referendum allowing Burundi’s president to serve into the 2030s, in apparent violation of constitutional term limits. VOA’s local correspondent told US Embassy Bujumbura that the decision was a complete surprise and we will hear more from VOA’s Africa Director as one of our witnesses today.

All of the witnesses today bring us an on-the-ground perspective of the closing space for non-governmental organizations, though they will provide a snapshot of conditions in several countries, their testimony’s will provide evidence of the growing regional trend of incursions against civic space. My hope is that this hearing will inform our view of possible U.S policy responses to better protect fundamental civil and political rights in Sub-Saharan Africa, which includes using sanctions, greater support for faith-based actor via USAID, and support media independence, specifically Voice of America – Africa (VOA).