

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 23, 2026

Adam Silver
Commissioner
National Basketball Association
New York, New York 10022

Dear Commissioner Silver:

We write to follow up on our 2024 letter, in which we expressed concern about the National Basketball Association (NBA)'s commercial partnership with the Rwandan government. We are increasingly alarmed by the NBA's deepening relationship with Rwanda despite its invasion of the neighboring Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), its continued support for a rebel group that has committed war crimes, and the resulting major shifts in U.S. policy toward Rwanda. The NBA risks becoming complicit in sportswashing by a Rwandan government that systematically abuses human rights. That is contrary to the spirit of American sports.

In our initial letter, we raised concerns about the NBA's partnership with the Rwandan government of President Paul Kagame given its atrocious human rights record and support for the armed group, M23, in eastern DRC. We also asked whether the NBA had sought guidance from the U.S. Department of State regarding its business activities in Rwanda and whether the league's policies had changed in response to developments in the region. The NBA responded publicly in September 2024 when NBA Deputy Commissioner Mark Tatum stated, "If American policies were to change regarding business activities in and relating to Rwanda or any other BAL market, our actions would, of course, change accordingly."

That commitment is particularly relevant today because U.S. policy toward Rwanda has changed since our initial letter, driven in part by Rwanda's worsening human rights record over the past two years, including:

- Rwanda's escalation of its illegal military assault on eastern DRC, including a deployment of up to 18,000 troops.¹
- Rwanda appears to now fully command² the M23, which has summarily executed hundreds of civilians,³ committed mass rape,⁴ recruited child soldiers,⁵ and tortured

¹ *Final report of the Group of Experts submitted in accordance with paragraph 6 of resolution 2783 (2025)*, UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL (June 6, 2026), p. 20, <https://docs.un.org/s/2026/466>.

² *Id.*, p. 21.

³ *DR Congo: M23 Mass Killings Near Virunga National Park*, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH (Aug. 20, 2025), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/08/20/dr-congo-m23-mass-killings-near-virunga-national-park>.

⁴ *M23, Rwanda's Proxy to Secure Control of Congolese Wealth*, THE OAKLAND INSTITUTE, <https://www.oaklandinstitute.org/report/shafted/m23-rwandas-proxy-secure-control-congolese-wealth>.

⁵ *DR Congo: Rwanda, M23 Forcibly Recruit, Detain Thousands*, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH (June 10, 2026), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/06/10/dr-congo-rwanda-m23-forcibly-recruit-detain-thousands#:~:text=M23%20fighters%2C%20backed%20by%20Rwandan%20military%20personnel%2C%20have,sould%20be%20investigated%20as%20possible%20crimes%20against%20humanity>.

civilians⁶ while illegally seizing control of Goma, Bukavu, and large swaths of eastern DRC.

- Over 5 million people are displaced because of the conflict in eastern DRC, and 10 million people risk starvation in territory controlled by the Rwanda-backed M23.⁷
- The week after signing the U.S.-brokered Washington Accords in December 2025, Rwanda and the M23 launched a new offensive that left 200,000 more civilians displaced.⁸
- Rwanda has been consistently accused of utilizing transnational repression tactics to target political dissidents within its immediate region and internationally, including here in the United States.⁹

As a result, U.S., UK, and European Union (EU) policies toward Rwanda have shifted markedly, and several major sports franchises have withdrawn their commercial sponsorships with Rwanda. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said in December 2025 that “Rwanda’s actions are...a clear violation of the Washington Accords,”¹⁰ and U.S. Ambassador to the UN Mike Waltz stated that “Rwanda is leading the region... toward more war.”¹¹ The United States has since taken a number of actions, including sanctioning the Rwandan Defense Forces and Rwanda’s major gold refinery for aiding the M23 rebels, banning senior Rwandan officials from traveling to the United States, and canceling an investment conference involving Rwanda and a U.S.-Rwanda health partnership.¹² Soccer clubs Arsenal and Bayern Munich also ended their Rwanda sponsorships in 2025 because of Rwanda’s invasion of eastern DRC.¹³ Additionally, the European Union and the U.K. have sanctioned Rwandan officials and companies.¹⁴

These actions raise an important question of whether the NBA’s continued commercial relationship with the Rwandan government remains consistent with the U.S. policy on which the league has said it relies. Despite the controversies, the NBA has doubled down on

⁶ *Death Was Everywhere: Arbitrary Detention, Killings, and Forced Recruitment by the M23 and the Rwanda Defense Force*, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH (June 10, 2026), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2026/06/10/death-was-everywhere/arbitrary-detention-killings-and-forced-recruitment-by-the>.

⁷ *Democratic Republic of Congo*, UN HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES, <https://www.unhcr.org/where-we-work/countries/democratic-republic-congo>; Nicholas Bariyo, *Millions Face Starvation. Their New Rulers are to Blame*, WALL STREET JOURNAL (Feb. 15, 2026), <https://www.wsj.com/world/africa/millions-face-starvation-in-congo-their-new-rulers-are-to-blame-498c02db>.

⁸ *DR Congo: Fall of Eastern City Puts Civilians at Risk*, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH (Dec. 15, 2025), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/12/15/dr-congo-fall-of-eastern-city-puts-civilians-at-risk>.

⁹ Testimony of Lewis Mudge, Central Africa Director, Human Rights Watch, TOM LANTOS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION (Feb. 15, 2024), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/02/15/transnational-repression-rwanda>.

¹⁰ *Rwanda’s actions in eastern Congo violate accords, Rubio says*, REUTERS (Dec. 13, 2025), <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/rwandas-actions-eastern-congo-clear-violation-accords-rubio-says-2025-12-13/>.

¹¹ Michelle Nichols, *US accuses Rwanda at UN of leading region toward war*, REUTERS (Dec. 12, 2025), <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/us-accuses-rwanda-un-leading-region-toward-war-2025-12-12/>.

¹² *Treasury Sanctions Rwanda Officials, Condemns Blatant Violations of Washington Peace Accords*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY (Mar. 2, 2026); *Treasury Sanctions Rwandan Gold Refinery and Network Enabling Illicit Conflict Minerals Trade*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY (June 26, 2026).

¹³ Matt Pearson, *Bayern Munich end Rwanda sponsorship after pressure*, DW (Aug. 8, 2025), <https://www.dw.com/en/bayern-munich-end-rwanda-sponsorship-after-pressure/a-73574184>.

¹⁴ *EU Sanctions Rwanda*, THE SENTRY (Mar. 17, 2025), <https://thesentry.org/2025/03/17/80730/eu-sanctions-rwanda/>.

its ties with Rwanda this year. President Kagame was allowed to attend the NBA All-Star Game in Los Angeles, where he met with you and “discussed Rwanda’s longstanding partnership with the NBA and continued collaboration.”¹⁵ Deputy Commissioner Tatum also traveled to Rwanda in June for the NBA-backed Basketball Africa League (BAL) Investor Summit, where he praised Kigali and said the country should have its own BAL team.¹⁶ Yet it is clear that the NBA and BAL are aware of shifting U.S. policy towards Rwanda: U.S. sanctions on the Rwandan Defense Forces in March 2026 forced the BAL to withdraw the Armée Patriotique Rwandaise (APR) Basketball Club, a team owned by the Rwandan Ministry of Defense, from the 2026 season.

Given your response to our initial letter and Rwanda’s escalating human rights violations, we ask that you provide a written response to the following questions by November 2, 2026:

1. What is the NBA’s red line for accepting money from foreign governments that commit human rights abuses?
2. How does the NBA reconcile its continued partnership with Rwanda with its purported commitment to justice?¹⁷
3. What plans does the NBA have to stand up for justice and human rights in Africa now that it is a primary partner in the BAL? How does partnering with the Rwandan government fit into those plans?
4. What is the current stance of the NBA and BAL on the team, Armée Patriotique Rwandaise, and its continued participation in the association?
5. Now that other major sports franchises have ended their Rwandan sponsorships, what are the league’s next steps with regard to Rwanda?
6. What specific changes in U.S. policy toward a country would lead the NBA to change or end a partnership with that country’s government? Do U.S. government actions against Rwanda since 2024 meet that standard?

We look forward to your response. Thank you for your attention to this important issue.

Sincerely,



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



Marsha Blackburn
United States Senator

¹⁵ Rwanda Presidency, *President Kagame met with Adam Silver*, X (Feb. 16, 2026), <https://x.com/UrugwiroVillage/status/2023457793773080950>.

¹⁶ Damas Sikuwabo, *Kigali well-positioned for BAL franchise, says NBA official*, NEW TIMES (June 4, 2026), <https://www.newtimes.co.rw/article/36259/sports/kigali-well-positioned-for-bal-franchise-says-nba-official>.

¹⁷ Mark Fainaru-Wada, *NBA responds to senators’ letter about Rwanda, BAL ties*, ESPN (Sep. 25, 2024), https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/41438845/nba-responds-senators-letter-rwanda; NBA CARES, <https://cares.nba.com/>.