

Baldwin Award Presentation Speech
Wade Henderson
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Good evening, I am Wade Henderson, Executive Director of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, the nation's oldest, largest, and most diverse civil and human rights coalition.

I would like to thank everyone for coming to tonight's Roger M. Baldwin Awards dinner. We're here tonight to honor an extraordinary organization, the African Association for the Defense of Human Rights (ASADHO) that for the last thirteen years has demonstrated an unfaltering commitment to human rights and civil society in one of the world's most dangerous and war-torn nations. We are very fortunate to have Mr. Amigo Ngonde (A-MEE-GOH N-GON-DEH FOON-SOO) as our guest tonight during what is both a critical time in the history of the DRC and a signal moment in the campaign for an international system of accountability and justice. We also greatly regret the absence of Mr. Mukinti (BA-OOM-BEE-LEE-AH MOO-KEEN-TEE), who was not granted a visa by the US embassy.

There is growing global recognition of the gravity of human rights abuses perpetrated in the DRC during the past decade. This increased awareness has had many positive consequences for the region, including an extension of the United Nations peacekeeping mission [*and just this morning, an announcement by International Criminal Court prosecutor Luis Moreno Ocampo that he will now begin investigations into war crimes committed in the DRC.*] These steps towards peace and justice would not have been possible without the long struggle of Congolese grassroots organizations against impunity, indifference and cruelty. No individual or group has been more instrumental in these efforts than the *Association africaine de défense des droits de l'homme*. For this reason, Human Rights First is pleased to award ASADHO the Roger M. Baldwin Medal of Liberty Prize.

The Baldwin Award was established in 1989 by Human Rights First and the ACLU to recognize outstanding commitments to human rights in the United States and overseas. The award is presented in alternating years by Human Rights First and the ACLU and carries a prize of \$25,000. Each year, the awards committee receives dozens of nominations and selects one NGO for recognition on the basis of its accomplishments in the field of human rights. The committee looks for organizations that have developed innovative solutions to pressing social and political injustices and made a lasting contribution to the human rights dialog both within and beyond the borders of their country of residence. Many of the past winners of the Baldwin Award have improved the lives of their countrymen in the face of great adversity, even targeted violence and persecution.

ASADHO meets and exceeds all the criteria for the Baldwin Award. In the areas of human rights monitoring, reporting and advocacy it has set the tone for all other organizations operating in the DRC.

ASADHO was founded in 1991 by a group of young lawyers and doctors troubled by the abuses of the government of Mobutu Sese Seko in the country that was then known as Zaire. Over the next five years, it

grew in size and capacity and established a presence in every region of the nation. It was one of only a handful of groups to monitor and write dispatches on the rebel insurgency that ousted Mobutu in 1997 and caused widespread massacres and massive population displacement. ASADHO's policy of reporting on abuses committed on both sides of the battle lines stoked the ire of the Mobutu administration and rebel insurgents. When Laurent Kabila came to power in 1997, he forced ASADHO into a brief period of exile. After three years of clandestine operations, ASADHO reopened its headquarters in Kinshasa in 2001. Today, that office oversees forty-two local sections and more than 5000 members across the DRC.

In addition to its monitoring activities, ASADHO has pursued reforms of the DRC's judiciary and military and empowered ordinary citizens with the legal resources to improve their lives. It successfully campaigned for the closure of the notorious Military Court, which ordered arbitrary arrests, conducted arbitrary and unfair trials and dispensed cruel sentences. The organization also founded a judicial assistance program, that since 1993 has provided pro-bono legal services to over one thousand clients seeking redress for crimes committed during the nation's many years of brutal conflict. During its work, ASADHO discovered that many DRC citizens are unaware of their rights under national and international law, and to remedy this situation it developed brochures on a range of human rights issues, including political detainment and access to medical care, and organized workshops and conferences on topics like "judiciary and impunity" and "journalism and human rights."

ASADHO's impact on political and legal conditions in the DRC extends beyond its own activities to the many human rights defenders that it has inspired and trained. Indeed, ASADHO has been a role model and a resource to numerous other organizations in the DRC. Chief among these is a strong network of NGOs on women's and children's rights, which grew out of a commission established by ASADHO. This network has been particularly effective at promoting positive change in the Eastern region of Kivu, which has seen large scale and systematic sexual violence. In this same spirit, ASADHO has trained countless paralegals, social workers, lawyers and other actors for change

In the last analysis, ASADHO's greatest contribution to the DRC may be its key role in persuading the government of Joseph Kabila to ratify the Rome Statute. This was no easy task and required a major public relations campaign in addition to aggressive legal maneuvering. Human Rights First worked closely with ASADHO on this campaign and can only applaud the organization's tireless efforts in bringing international justice to the Congo. This HRF-ASADHO partnership has won great results: the ICC prosecutor's announcement is only the latest in what promises to be a series of positive steps towards accountability in the DRC.

These accomplishments would be extraordinary under any circumstances, but ASADHO is even more exceptional for pursuing their human rights program in a climate of fear and intimidation. The organization's leaders, staff and members have endured extremely difficult working conditions and

repeated harassment, including beating and detainment, by security forces. Even in exile, the leadership of ASADHO, including Mr. Ngonde, were subject to threats of violence against themselves and their families. When Laurent Kabila outlawed the organization in 1998, he had its offices sealed and its assets confiscated. Despite this adversity, ASADHO is the only NGO that has sustained a presence in every region of the DRC since the first days of the Mobutu regime.

This combination of courage and resolve is what makes ASADHO particularly deserving of the Baldwin Award. The organizations leaders, such as Messrs Ngonde and Mukinti, never lost faith in their pursuit of peace and justice despite a political situation that many considered among the most hopeless in the world. Human rights activists in the DRC and across the globe can take heart in their bravery and conviction. They have done their fellow citizens and the international community a great favor, and I hope you will join me tonight in thanking them.

It is with great honor that I present Mr. Ngonde on behalf of ASADHO with the 2004 Roger M. Baldwin Award.