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One Hundred Thirteenth Congress
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs
2170 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515
www.foreignaffairs.house.gov

May 6, 2015

The Honorable Jeffery Shell
Chairman
Broadcasting Board of Governors
330 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20237

Dear Mr. Shell:

We are writing to express our deep concern over the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) plan to eliminate the Voice of America's (VOA) Central Africa service and end its local language broadcasts in Kinyarwanda and Kirundi.

The VOA Central Africa service was created following the Rwandan genocide to provide credible news and information to the African Great Lakes region. The local language broadcasts remain highly popular among listeners, particularly those using shortwave radios in rural communities. We understand that VOA broadcasts to the region will continue in English, French, and Swahili. However, as a majority of Rwandans speak *only* Kinyarwanda and over a third of Burundians speak *only* Kirundi, we are concerned that the remaining VOA broadcasts will fail to reach a broad audience.

As you may know, Freedom House's 2014 Freedom of the Press index scored both Rwanda and Burundi as "not free." In both countries, self-censorship reportedly remains pervasive and the media is under tight government control. Local journalists are rarely willing to pursue controversial or investigative reporting on politically sensitive issues due to years of state intimidation, threats, and prosecution. As a result, the VOA Central Africa service is one of the sole independent and credible international news organizations left with programming in local languages.

We are also concerned with the message that eliminating the VOA Central Africa Service will send to governments and people in the region. Since the recent suspension of the BBC's news

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service by the Rwandan government, the VOA is the last remaining international outlet broadcasting in Kinyarwanda. A decision by the U.S. government to unilaterally eliminate the VOA service could be interpreted as the U.S. weakening its support for freedom of the press in Central Africa.

The political environment in both Rwanda and Burundi is extremely tense, with elections scheduled in the near future and anticipated challenges to presidential term limits. The need for impartial and independent reporting at this time could not be greater. Ending the VOA Central Africa service would be a significant setback for media freedom in the region and could allow less than credible media outlets to gain a greater influence.

We strongly urge you to reconsider the proposal to eliminate VOA's Central Africa service and end key local language programming in Rwanda and Burundi.

Sincerely,



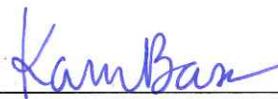
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Chairman
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,
Global Human Rights, and International
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