

Kagame confers National Order of Outstanding Friendship medals

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President Paul Kagame with seven Igihango National Order of Friendship medal recipients Hezi Bezalel, Gilbert R. Chagoury, John W. Dick, Dr. Paul Farmer, Howard Buffet, Prof. Linda Melvern and Joseph Ritchie. Missing from the picture are Dafroza Mukarumongi-Gauthier and Alain Gauthier. Village Urugwiro

President Paul Kagame last night awarded for the first time the Igihango National Order of Outstanding Friendship medals to nine individuals in recognition of their exemplary service to the nation in various capacities.

The nine new members of the National Order of Outstanding Friendship include, Hezi Bezalel, Howard G. Buffett, Gilbert R. Chagoury, John W. Dick, Dr. Paul Farmer, Dafroza Mukarumongi-Gauthier, Alain Gauthier, Prof. Linda Melvern and Joseph Ritchie.

Hezi Bezalel, an Israeli businessman was recognized for standing with the country through hard times and for building ties between Israel and Rwanda over the

years.

Bezalel who was described as an 'ally for all seasons' first arrived in Rwanda in the middle of 1994, a time when most international figures turned away from Rwanda.

American investor and philanthropist Howard G. Buffet described as a 'visionary of sustainable well-being' was also honoured.

Buffet has made significant contribution to Rwanda's agricultural transformation, national parks, as well as security across the great lakes region.

Ambassador Gilbert Chagoury, who was termed as an 'envoy of goodwill' played a great role in fostering ties between Rwanda and Vatican at a time when relations were shaky.

Chagoury, a businessman with Nigerian and Lebanese roots continues to act as a counsellor to world leaders and is well known for his philanthropy.

John Dick, the founder of multi-billion dollar satellite company, O3B was recognized for connecting Rwanda with global business leaders leading to fruitful investment ties.

Dick who has served as Rwanda's honorary consul to his native British island, Jersey, was termed as 'bridge-builder to opportunity.'

Partners in Health founder, Dr. Paul Farmer was honoured in absentia for his efforts in improving the local health sector and drastically reducing mortality rates.

Dr. Farmer, who was labelled as a 'crusader for dignity' has worked closely with the local health sector for about 15 years with lessons from his partnership being replicated across the world.

Alain Gauthier and his wife Dafroza Mukarumongi-Gauthier were conferred medals

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The two recognized as 'seekers of justice' have been involved in pursuit of fugitives and had impact against the growing global tolerance for Genocide denial.

Renowned British investigative journalist Linda Melvern received the Igiango National Order of Friendship medal for her role producing meticulously researched accounts of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi.

Melvern who was cited as an 'archaeologist of truth' has been vocal in combating genocide denial by demonstrating that Rwanda's tragedy has lessons for humanity.

Joseph Ritchie an international businessman from the US was honoured for his role in bringing multiple business people into the country to facilitate economic transformation.

Ritchie, described as an 'evangelist of prosperity' has among other roles previously served as a full-time Chief Executive of the Rwanda Development Board.

Speaking at the award ceremony, President Kagame said that with the country facing what some may have considered insurmountable challenges for the past 23 years, the individuals have stood with the country and added to Rwandans commitment to

surmount them.

"Our friends who we acknowledge and recognise here tonight added their efforts to the dedication and commitment of Rwandans, we have really gone through the hardships together and overcome those seemingly insurmountable problems," he said.

Through their actions, he said that the honourees had greatly demonstrated their devotion to Rwanda and proven that the country was never alone even in the hardest of times.

"We deem each of them to have a special bond with our country, because of specific actions that could only be taken by someone with deep love and attachment and dedication to the people of Rwanda. In the context of Rwanda's dramatic journey, the concrete acts of solidarity have particular meaning. Through the toughest times, where circumstances dictated that we had to rely on ourselves to survive, Rwanda was never totally alone," he added.

Kagame assured them that they can also count on the country in their times of need.

President Kagame noted that the ceremony would be a regular one going forward with an aim to inspire young Rwandans to conduct their lives with the highest principles and ambitions.

"The purpose of our various National Orders is to honour extraordinary contributions to our national life. Doing so serves to inspire our young people to conduct their lives with the highest principles and ambitions. This ceremony will therefore be a regular occurrence, allowing us in due course to recognise the many others whose achievements fortify our country," he said.

The recipients said that they will continue to work with the country as they have over the years developed affection for the country and consider themselves a part of it.

Most termed the conferment as the biggest recognition in their lives while others noted that by working with Rwanda, they had learnt lessons such as resilience, determination and courage.

The ceremony is inspired by an ancient Rwandan tradition which served as the greatest bond between two parties.

It was viewed as an unbreakable and lifelong bond sealed before witnesses with a symbolic drop of blood

before consumption of a special beverage with mystical properties, known as 'Igihango'.

The honourees were adorned with a golden medal bearing the Rwandan coat of arms and a star as well as a certificate signed by the President of the Republic.