

Prison Fellowship backs Rwanda's push to strengthen reintegration of ex-genocide convicts

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Minister of National Unity and Civic Engagement, Dr Jean-Damascène Bizimana and President and CEO of Prison Fellowship International (PFI), Andrew Corley, meet in Kigali on January 14. Photos by Kellya

Minister of National Unity and Civic Engagement, Dr Jean-Damascène Bizimana, said that a strong programme for the social reintegration of ex-genocide convicts is the only viable solution, as many convicts are being released after serving 30-year sentences. While some have fully confessed, a few have completely refused to admit guilt and are likely to cause discomfort in the communities and families they are returning to.

Bizimana made the remarks on January 14, while interacting with the President and CEO of Prison Fellowship International (PFI), Andrew Corley, and his team, whom he commended for their indelible work of walking a journey with the Government of Rwanda.

Particularly, he praised their focus on holistic rehabilitation for inmates through spiritual programmes such as The Prisoner's Journey (TPJ), which promote spiritual growth and reconciliation.



Commissioner General of the Rwanda Correctional Service (RCS), CG Evariste Murenzi, and President and CEO of Prison Fellowship International (PFI), Andrew Corley

For over 30 years, Prison Fellowship Rwanda has provided vocational training (such as carpentry and languages) to support reintegration, psychosocial support through healing spaces and trauma care, and assistance to prisoners' families. All these efforts aim at transforming lives, reducing recidivism, and fostering peace in the post-genocide period, contributing to unity and reconciliation, which currently stands at 95.3 per cent.

"We want to put more effort into social reintegration," Bizimana said. "We still have genocide perpetrators who did not confess and are among the inmates returning to a society that is still healing. These programmes are the ones we are targeting as a pillar for a harmonised society."

Bizimana said the programmes should be established across the country, with particular focus on the Southern and Western Provinces. These regions still lag behind in terms of social harmony because many perpetrators were convicted there, they host numerous genocide memorials, killings were carried out extensively, widows are many, and genocidal ideology remains visible.

"This is further fueled by proximity to Burundi and the DR Congo, where such ideologies continue to be actively harbored," he explained.

"Those programmes should focus on the youth more than any other demographic since 70 per cent of the population is below 35 years of age. Many of them are naïve and did not commit the genocide; however, they have been affected the most," he noted.

"We need them to rid themselves of this evil ideology and raise responsible citizens who understand that genocide was possible because core societal values had been destroyed. It was carried out by the government and by Rwandans themselves," he said.



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“With the dialogue we are having, we use testimonies from genocide convicts who repent and reflect. These testimonies become lessons for the youth and help them understand that those convicted were sentenced because they actually committed killings. Prison Fellowship has been helping us collect this information adequately,” he added.

Andrew Corley, who is in Rwanda for his first visit, also met with the Commissioner General of the Rwanda Correctional Service (RCS), CG Evariste Murenzi, at RCS headquarters. They discussed continued collaboration as crucial to RCS’s mandate, complementing its rehabilitation focus with PFR’s specialised support in spiritual, psychosocial, and family-based interventions, as well as the way forward to ultimately cement the “shift from a punitive to a correctional philosophy.”

Through this collaboration, the two institutions have established healing space groups and psychosocial support programmes, the Child’s Journey programme (which links children with their incarcerated parents), pre-release reintegration programmes, restorative justice initiatives, community linkage efforts, and The Prisoner’s Journey programme for spiritual resilience.

These programmes need further strengthening, including support for the development and sustainability of halfway homes, expansion of livelihoods and economic empowerment initiatives, and increased investment in healing space groups as discussed while appreciating existing partnership which has benefited more than 78,968 inmates since 2010.

“Your presence here today signifies a strong bond of collaboration and shared vision that unite us in the noble mission of correctional reforms, rehabilitation and restoration of human dignity,” said CG Murenzi.

“We recognize and appreciate the invaluable role Prison Fellowship International has played globally in advancing human correctional practices, promoting restorative justices and supporting reintegration of people back to society. In particular, RCS has been acting as places that serve transformation with a mission that ensures opportunity for education as well,” he added.



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“I know good leadership and I see it as a leader myself,” said President Corley. “I believe that when it comes to effecting change and creating environments for flourishing, leaders have a very great role in the election. It’s not always identified and you often sometimes you don’t always know when you’ve got good leadership, but you always know when you don’t.”

Faith-based programming is an important element for reconciliation, restitution and restoration. That inner change is really vital,” he explained.

The CEO said that he bases his thoughts and his heart on what God says. Therefore, he believes that this foundation is one of the strongest that can ever exist, and that Rwanda is living out this way of life.

“You are living that. Out of a situation of desperation 30 years ago, you are building your nation in a way that has very solid roots. I truly believe that you have much to remind us of in the West, where we are forgetting what our roots are. We are forgetting what made us who we are and what, by the grace of God, we were able to accomplish.”

He also visited the Kigali Genocide Memorial, where he learned about the social and political factors that led to the Genocide, part of issues Prison Fellowship International works on, and laid a wreath at the mass grave where more than 250,000 victims are buried.



Officials pose for a group photo at the meeting