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AVOCATS SANS FRONTIÈRES FRANCE CONDEMNS LAST-MINUTE CANCELLATION OF RIGHTS CON 2026 IN ZAMBIA

Abuja, Nigeria, May 4, 2026

Avocats Sans Frontières France ASF France expresses deep concern and condemnation following the abrupt cancellation of RightsCon 2026 in Lusaka, Zambia, just days before the summit was scheduled to begin on May 5, 2026.

The Zambian Government's decision to withdraw support, citing vague "administrative and security clearances," effectively cancelled the world's largest summit on human rights in the digital age. Access Now, the convening organization, has since confirmed that the cancellation followed diplomatic pressure from the People's Republic of China related to the planned participation of Taiwanese civil society.

The cancellation constitutes a serious violation of fundamental rights protected under international law. The right to freedom of assembly and association, guaranteed by Article 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Article 11 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, was denied to more than 2,600 in-person and 1,100 online participants from over 150 countries. The right to freedom of expression under Article 19 ICCPR was also undermined, as RightsCon serves as a critical forum for activists, journalists, and technologists confronting digital repression. Moreover, the decision sets a dangerous precedent whereby foreign interference can dictate which civil society gatherings may take place on African soil, undermining Zambia's sovereignty and civic space across the region.

RightsCon 2026 was to be the first-ever RightsCon hosted in Sub-Saharan Africa. Zambia had the opportunity to position itself as a regional leader in digital innovation, human rights, and open governance, convening governments, courts, law enforcement, tech companies, and civil society to shape the continent's digital future. Instead, the cancellation represents a loss of African leadership, significant economic harm to Lusaka's hotels, airlines, vendors, and SMEs, and reputational damage that contradicts Zambia's commitments under the African Charter.

ASF France stands in full solidarity with Access Now, the RightsCon team, and the thousands of participants, speakers, and partners whose work was disrupted. We commend Access Now for its transparency and principled decision to prioritize the safety and integrity of the community. We call on the Government of Zambia to issue a full public explanation and guarantee that future human rights gatherings will not be subject to foreign interference. We further urge the African Union and SADC to affirm that African states must safeguard civic space, and call on the international community to support affected participants and ensure that digital rights dialogue continues.

While RightsCon 2026 will not proceed, the fight for an open, secure, and rights-respecting internet continues. ASF France remains committed to working with partners across Africa to ensure that legal frameworks and public policies protect, not restrict, fundamental freedoms online and offline.

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