

By Jeffrey Gettleman and Josh Kron

From The New York Times | [Original Article](#)

NAIROBI, Kenya — The American lawyer [jailed by the authorities in Rwanda last week](#) on accusations of denying the nation's [genocide](#) tried to kill himself with a pill overdose in his cell, officials there said Wednesday, and he now may face a new charge under Rwandan law: attempted suicide.

Rwandan police officials said that when they checked Wednesday morning on the prisoner, Peter Erlinder, an American law professor who recently arrived in [Rwanda](#) to represent an opposition politician, they found him slumped in his cell, nearly unconscious.

Police officials said that Mr. Erlinder, who faces 25 years in prison if convicted of spreading genocide ideology, had swallowed a handful of prescription medication pills before he was going to be subjected to more police interrogations.

“When we asked him why, he said he wanted to commit suicide,” said a Rwandan police spokesman, Eric Kayiranga, in a telephone interview. “He knows the charges against him, he knows the weight of the sentence.”

Rwanda, a close American ally that has received hundreds of millions of dollars of American aid, is tightening restrictions on political opponents and critics of the government in the months leading up to elections in August, several human rights groups have said. No subject seems to be touchier than the genocide in 1994, in which hundreds of thousands of minority Tutsis and moderate Hutus were massacred by government-backed death squads. In recent years, thousands of Rwandans have been charged with genocide ideology, an Orwellian-sounding and vaguely defined crime often leveled against anyone who challenges the government's version of events in 1994.

But Mr. Erlinder's case is the first time Rwanda has leveled such charges against a Westerner. And the charges against Mr. Erlinder, 62, seem to have nothing to do with what he may have said or done in Rwanda, but more with his earlier work as a defense lawyer at a [United Nations](#) -backed tribunal in Tanzania.

At that tribunal, Mr. Erlinder, who represented a top genocide suspect, disputed the standard characterization of the bloodshed in Rwanda as Hutu victimizers slaughtering innocent Tutsis. Instead, he said that the violence was more spontaneous and possibly the result of Tutsi rebels killing Hutu civilians. He even went as far as to say that the Tutsi rebels, who now rule Rwanda, assassinated Rwanda's president in 1994, the event that [set off the widespread murder](#) .

Martin Ngoga, Rwanda's prosecutor general, called Mr. Erlinder a "denier" and "revisionist" of the genocide and said it did not matter where the offensive remarks were made.

"We have jurisdictional links for statements and publications done outside Rwanda," Mr. Ngoga said.

Mr. Erlinder's family is outraged about his incarceration and upset that the United States Embassy in the Rwandan capital, Kigali, which refused to comment on the matter, is not doing more to help.

"The U.N. hired him to be an advocate," said his daughter, Sarah Erlinder, a lawyer in Minnesota. "Now he is being held for exactly what he said and did for the job."

She said that her father, who is now in a hospital in Kigali, had high blood pressure and a congenital heart defect, but that she doubted he would have tried to commit suicide, especially if he knew it was a crime. It is not clear, though, if attempted suicide is a crime under current Rwandan law or might soon be a crime under a proposed penal code.

Mr. Erlinder, a professor at [William Mitchell College of Law](#) in St. Paul, was one of the more outspoken defense lawyers at the international tribunal, colleagues said, and he saw his job as

knocking down the conventional view of the genocide and showing that it was a two-sided fight, with two-sided war crimes.

He came to Rwanda in late May to represent Victoire Ingabire, an opposition politician who has also been charged recently with espousing genocide ideology. He was arrested on Friday.

“Imagine a civil rights crusader in the 1960s,” said Alan J. Kuperman, a political science professor at the [University of Texas](#) who knows Mr. Erlinder through research on Rwanda. “That’s how he sees himself, that there’s this great conspiracy out there and he’s the only one speaking the truth.”

Jeffrey Gettleman reported from Nairobi, and Josh Kron from Kampala, Uganda.