

Rwanda's judiciary announced plans to reform the way children are tried in court, following concerns that minors' rights are sometimes violated and that some are being detained illegally.

The announcement was made during a roundtable discussion on Monday, November 24, 2024, attended by lawyers, prosecutors, investigators, and UNICEF representatives. The meeting focused on a draft set of new guidelines introduced by Donatilla Mukantaganzwa, President of the Supreme Court and Chair of the High Council of the Judiciary. The guidelines aim to modernize juvenile justice practices and ensure that children's rights are fully respected.



Monique Mukamana (photo), a child rights officer at the National Child Development Agency (NCDA), said that while Rwanda has laws protecting children, they are not always implemented effectively.

"Some children are detained for minor offenses, even though the law stipulates detention should only apply to crimes punishable by more than five years," she said. "If a child steals a phone or a computer, the first question should be whether the offense carries a sentence of more than five years. If not, the child should be tried outside detention."

Mukamana added that some children are held in pre-trial detention for longer than the 15 days allowed by law. Interrogations without a guardian present can lead children to make statements they do not understand or know the consequences of.

Harrison Mutabazi, the spokesperson for the judiciary, said the draft guidelines incorporate input from all juvenile justice stakeholders and will require approval from the High Council of the Judiciary before implementation.

"The Supreme Court's guidelines aim to bring together all branches of the juvenile justice system to improve coordination in protecting children—from police to prosecutors to the courts," Mutabazi said.

Alphonse Hitiyaremye, Vice President of the Supreme Court, said the reforms emphasize rehabilitation over punishment. "We are promoting justice that helps children reform, not punitive measures that harm them," he said.



UNICEF Representative Lieke van de Wiel (photo) pledged continued support, noting that child-friendly justice requires flexible approaches tailored to each child. “There is no single solution to the challenges children face in the justice system. Reducing obstacles during trials helps children see that justice serves them,” van de Wiel said.

The Supreme Court said the guidelines will take effect in January 2026, complementing existing child protection laws. Currently, Rwanda has more than 395 children in the Nyagatare juvenile detention center, facing charges including assault, drug offenses, truancy, and theft.