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BURUNDI: INTERVIEW WITH MISSION DELEGATE JUST RETURNED FROM SCENE OF COUP

TEXT OF INTERVIEW WITH GODFREY BYARUHANGA 29 OCTOBER 1993.

Were you actually in Bujumbura when the coup happened?

Yes, I was in Bujumbura at the Novotel hotel which is in the centre of the capital. The coup started at the Presidential Palace which is some 100m from the hotel itself. It was about 2 am when I heard outbursts of gunfire and some explosions which woke me up. Fully awake, I knew definitely there was a violent coup going on, though I couldn't tell what the reason for this was.

I saw some soldiers on the street just opposite the hotel which is the Chausée du Peuple Murundi. I then saw groups of soldiers, some going north, others going south, but there was no shooting amongst these soldiers so it seemed that they were all part of one group, without any opposition, but there were still many bursts of gunfire near the Presidential Palace or around it. Subsequently, I saw armoured cars also moving south and north with more soldiers following afterwards.

After about 30 minutes, I returned to my bed, but kept going back to the window to watch what was happening just in case and then I saw two soldiers in red berets shortly joined by a third who blockaded what is known as Boulevard de l'Uprona which leads to the president's office. These soldiers started running towards the president's office. Then at about 3 am, I saw armoured personnel carriers also moving up and down that same road, some of which stationed themselves directly opposite the hotel, but none of these vehicles actually opened fire. The gunfire did continue in various parts of the city though, especially near the Presidential Palace, until around 4 am.

Before 4 am, I received a telephone call from the Minister for Communications, Jean-Marie Ngendahayo, who I had met in 1992, when he was a member of the Burundi Human Rights League, and I had also come to know his family. I was due to meet him the following day as Minister - we were discussing the role of the media in promoting human rights and preventing violations. When he rang, he greeted me and then asked me how I was. I replied that I was fine personally but that there had been gunfire and explosions and some shells which had apparently been fired from the armoured cars that had been driving around.

He asked me what I thought was happening and then told me that there had been a coup attempt and some soldiers were trying to overthrow the government while others were fighting back against them. I told him that I could see lots of armoured vehicles passing right in front of the hotel and many soldiers running up and down with the armoured personal carriers and I wasn't sure what part they were playing in the coup. His impression at the time was that it was probably soldiers who were trying to patrol the streets and beat off the coup leaders. I didn't hear from him again because he fled from his home soon afterward.

So, at about 4 am, it was clear to me that there definitely was a coup taking place so I decided to telephone the International Secretariat of Amnesty International in London to leave a message on the answerphone there, because, in my past experience of coups, sooner or later communications are cut and I wanted Amnesty to be informed that something was happening in Burundi and that we were safe before communications were severed.

The violence continued until about 6 am but what was interesting to me was that the soldiers weren't shooting at houses or civilians. They seemed to be very organized and disciplined. We remained uninformed about what was happening until 6 or 7 am but continued to see many soldiers guarding strategic points in the city such as the roads leading to the president's office. The radio station and telecommunications were being held by the military. There were no national radio or television broadcasts and the telephones weren't working so no form of communication was possible.

To the people who were staying at the hotel, it was unclear exactly who was in power at that point. In fact, for the first time, some soldiers came to the hotel at around 8 am and people wondered whether these men were the ones holding the coup, or supporters of the government. It was only later in the evening of the 21 October that we heard the statement on Radio Burundi saying that the soldiers had risen up against the government and that a National Council for Salvation had been set up led by Francois Ngeze who was Minister of the Interior in the previous government which had been led by President Pierre Buyoya. Many questions occurred to me, for instance why had he been chosen for this position, how was he participating in the coup, was he a coup leader? Subsequently people said that he had been forced to take on this role. What was equally strange was that the announcement did not cover the reasons why the military had risen up against the government, what had made them feel this was necessary. In fact, up until now, no one has been officially told why the soldiers decided to overthrow the government.

So we stayed at the hotel on the 21 October and it was on the following day that we began to learn of the people who had been killed including the president himself although international radio and television continued to say that the fate of the president and some of his ministers remained unclear. At that point we had been informed by credible sources that the President, several ministers, including the minister who had jurisdiction over the security police and the president of the National Assembly and the deputy had been murdered in cold blood.

These extrajudicial executions were very distressing to us, the more so because we had held talks with the slain government officials a day or so

before their death. We met the Minister for Territorial Administration and Communal Development, Juvenal Ndayikeza, on 18 October; the President of the National Assembly, Pontien Karibwami, and his deputy, Gilles Bimazubute, as well as the General of National Documentation and Migrations, Richard Ndikumwami on 20 October, the day before their deaths. On Monday 18 October we had also met the Minister for External Relations and Cooperation (Foreign Affairs), Sylvestre Ntibantunganya, whose wife was shot dead on the night of the coup. We had also been due to meet President Melchior Ndadaye before the end of the visit.

Were they murdered during the shooting you heard? Do you know any more about that?

We tried to investigate as much as possible, and we established from credible sources that some were murdered in the barracks and others probably at home but the five most important government officials appear to have been murdered in the barracks of the 11th Battalion Paratroopers.

As for the President, a source close to the military High Command in Bujumbura says that at about 2 am soldiers from the 11th Battalion who are paratroopers, otherwise known as commandos, attacked the Presidential Palace and asked the bodyguards while they were shooting to hand over the president to them. Apparently the bodyguards tried to beat the battalion off, but then were overcome as the numbers were very much greater.

The army chief of staff is reported to have come to help the president who, we were told, was whisked away after in an armoured car together with his wife and children and taken to Muha barracks in the south of the capital. When the 11th Battalion realised that he had been taken away, they decided to follow him and surrounded the barracks where he had been taken. The chief of staff also seems to have gone with the other soldiers and apparently tried to convince the soldiers not to arrest the president. But the 11th Battalion continued to demand that he be handed over to them.

It is clear that the chief of staff tried to negotiate for the safety of the president's family as well as some other officials who were subsequently allowed to leave the Muha barracks. The president himself stayed in the barracks until about 7 am when the chief of staff and soldiers apparently agreed to hand him over to the 11th Battalion. He was taken to their barracks and killed at about 10 am. According to our information he was actually strangled and probably tortured during the time that he was in the barracks. There is some confirmed information that they had brought some military officials and some civilians to attend the murder of the president.

The other officials also seem to have been killed in the same barracks because that's where the bodies stayed. According to our information, as I mentioned earlier, those who were killed included the Minister of the Interior, Juvenal Ndayikeza; the President of the National Assembly, Pontien Karibwami; the Deputy President of the National Assembly, Gilles Bimazubute and the Administrator General of the Security Police, Richard Ndikumwami. Their bodies stayed in the barracks and by the weekend of the 23-24 October they were in quite a bad state of decay and had to be put in coffins, after which they were buried in the barracks.

We know that the International Committee of the Red Cross was trying hard for access to any prisoners the soldiers were holding and also, if possible, to identify the bodies of those who had been killed. To my knowledge, they had not been able to see any of the bodies or any of the people that the soldiers were holding by the time we left Burundi on 27 October.

What other violations were going on in Bujumbura?

There were some soldiers going out, especially at night, and murdering Hutu, who they believed were harbouring some feelings against Tutsi and the army. There were several incidents when soldiers shot dead Hutu in Bujumbura. Circumstances were unclear, but this was part of the same pattern as before, of soldiers murdering civilians, unarmed civilians - and of course they can always rely on impunity.

What was happening outside the capital while all this was going on?

At the end of the week we started to hear reports of killings in the provinces which were certainly sparked off by the coup itself. The president and the parliament had been elected in June 1993 by a huge majority. This meant that the people had really had a lot of trust and confidence in the government and more so because the majority of the people who had elected this government were Hutu who had not had any leadership in the country for quite a long time.

Since independence in 1962, there had never been any president elected by the people. Each of the three previous presidents had come to power by coup. There had been an attempt in the 1960s by the Hutu to take control of the nation. The first prime minister was a Tutsi, but he was a priest and the leader of a party that was dominated by the Hutu. When he was murdered, the Hutu who was second in command in the party tried to take over, he was denied that by the Tutsi military and in 1965 apparently some Hutu soldiers tried to overthrow the government which had subsequently been imposed on them.

So after the coup last week, the Hutu were absolutely frustrated and very indignant that once again their leader had been murdered. They felt that this was definitely an attempt to prevent the Hutu from ever leading the country. They believed the coup was led by Tutsi soldiers - the military is dominated by Tutsi, probably some 90 per cent are Tutsi, whereas the constitute about 15 per cent of the population. It was clear that Tutsi soldiers, probably with the support of some civilians, did not want Hutu leaders at all. Although of course they are not only against the Hutu themselves, but also against Tutsi who seem to be supporting the president's FRODEBU Party (Front pour la Démocratie au Burundi). So for instance the Prime Minister and the Minister for Communications are both Tutsi.

So the Hutu people rose up and unfortunately they started attacking innocent Tutsi civilians, outside in the provinces. The Hutu of course expected a backlash, they expected reprisals, as has always happened in the past - they expected that many Hutu would be murdered by the soldiers, and that's what started the refugee exodus towards Rwanda.

We have reports that soldiers did go to the provinces and in some cases they started killing Hutu, in some cases defending their fellow Tutsi civilians, but in other cases killing simply in blind violence against Hutu, or in reprisal attacks against Hutu. They started shooting members of the Hutu ethnic group and many are said to have died, and apparently a lot of Tutsi civilians were also killed. We also have information about Hutu provincial governors who had just been appointed by the new government in 1993, who have also been murdered.

Was all the response to the coup violent?

No. Quite significant is the amount of political spirit among the Hutu, who have stood up and demanded their rights peacefully. It has been a tragic series of events, of course, both politically and socially, and many civilians have fought their fellow civilians. But there were also some peaceful demonstrations in Bujumbura, which is probably something that the soldiers never expected.

Even on the day following the coup, some civilians came out on the streets to demonstrate and were attacked by soldiers. Quite a number of them - we are not sure of numbers, but at least 10 - were shot dead by soldiers in an attempt to disperse the demonstration.

So were these peaceful demonstrations?

They were peaceful demonstrations and there were several more which followed. We saw some of them ourselves, and they were very peaceful indeed, just people coming out on the streets. On the first day there were several hundred, and on the day we left, the 27 October, we believe there were several thousand people. At least 5,000 people on the streets, all demonstrating and all as far as we could see peaceful.

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