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THE MEDIA AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN BURUNDI

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INTRODUCTION

1. Burundi is a small, central African, agricultural country of 27,834 square kilometres. Burundians speak one language (Kirundi) and live so intermingled that an outside observer cannot easily identify the four ethnic groups (Bahutu, Batutsi, Batwa, and Baganwa) if he relies solely on scientific theories advanced by anthropologists and ethnologists. These groups' struggle for power is the major factor that would help in identifying and understanding them. The Hutu, the largest part of the population (85%), have been excluded from power for many years. The Tutsi, on the contrary, a minority representing ten to fifteen per cent of the population has historically exercised political, military and economic power. Other ethnic groups include the Twa, a minority descendant of a hunting population, and the Ganwa descending from Burundi former royal family.
2. Burundi has been at war since 1993 after the killing of Melchior Ndadaye, the first democratically elected (Hutu) President. He governed for three months before being murdered by the Tutsi-dominated army, which also killed other leaders of his political party, the Front for Democracy in Burundi (FRODEBU). Following this murder, Hutus organised by officials and political leaders massacred thousands of Tutsi civilians. Tutsi soldiers and police subsequently massacred thousands of Hutus – in some cases in communities where there had been no previous killings of Tutsi.¹
3. From the time of the Ndadaye murder to 1996, when Pierre Buyoya (a Tutsi officer) took power in a coup, the two main parties, FRODEBU and the National Union for Progress (UPRONA), along with smaller parties attempted to govern in an uneasy coalition. They sometimes yielded to pressure from Tutsi extremist parties whose militia carried out 'dead city' operations that forced

¹ See Human Rights Watch, International Federation of Human Rights, Ligue des Droits de la personne dans la Région des Grands Lacs, Organisation Mondiale Contre la Torture, Centre National pour la Coopération au développement, and Nationaal Centrum Voor Ontwikkelingssame, Novib, *Rapport Final de la Commission d'Enquête sur les Violations des Droits de l'Homme au Burundi depuis le 21 octobre 1993*. July 5, 1994.

businesses and offices to close and so brought life in Bujumbura to a standstill. The parties also triggered ethnic cleansing in different suburbs of the capital. On the other side, increasingly militant Hutus took up arms in rebel movements, three of which currently pose the major threat to the government. The Front for National Liberation (FNL), important more for its military capacity than for the number of its adherents is stronger around the capital; the Force for the Defence of Democracy (FDD), the largest of the rebel movements, operates primarily in the east and in the south; the less important National Liberation Front (FROLINA) operates largely in the south.

4. During this war, both the government army and rebel groups have violated civilians' rights either with killings, physical maiming, looting, forced labour, rape and other sexual abuses. Many human rights violations have never been denounced because the only operating media were the state radio, which followed the government policy and interests. Newspapers were censored to the extent that few dared say that the army slaughtered innocent civilians. Many journalists were killed because they were suspected of hindering the political objectives of the government.
5. Gradually, things changed. In April 1995, Studio Ijambo, the first independent news and program producing studio, was set up by the non-governmental organisation Search for Common Ground with a view to facilitate the possibilities of dialogue between Burundi's antagonistic leaders, to promote independent media in Burundi and reconciliation among different ethnic communities. The main recipients of its programmes were the state radio itself and Radio Agatasha created by Fondation Hironnelle and based in Bukavu in Eastern Congo. This Radio was shut down in October 1996 when war broke out between former president Mobutu and Congolese rebels. At that time, Studio Ijambo could no longer go on broadcasting on Radio Agatasha. However, it went on producing programmes on political, economic and social issues, including those advocating human rights although the remaining outlet, the Burundi state radio, rejected most programmes that did not comply with the government's line. Fortunately, Studio Ijambo journalists were also correspondents of many international radio stations like the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Voice of America (VOA), Channel Africa, Radio France Internationale (RFI), Deutsche Welle and news agencies like Associated Press (AP), Agence France Presse (AFP), and Reuters.
6. This was and remains a very successful means of denouncing different human rights violations because it allows the local and international community to know what is happening in Burundi. In wartime, only independent journalists tried to report about human rights violations on international media. To be accepted, their reports had to be done professionally done. A report on human rights violations requires investigation, concision and then credibility. Therefore, the fact of working with international outlets compelled journalists to work professionally and therefore improve their presentation of human rights. To succeed, these journalists had of course to be courageous enough to talk about human rights issues that other persons are afraid to raise.
7. The journalists' greatest challenge was and remains the ability to reach places where human rights have been violated and then producing honest, credible, and unbiased reports on a conflict they are part of. The other one – no less important – is the physical threats that some journalists endure once they denounce human rights abuses. Journalists, therefore, often keep silent in front of human rights violations out of fear of being ill-treated by the regime whose security apparatus, the police and the army, are often complicit in the violence, as they are in looting and extorting goods from citizens. This state of things deeply affects the presentation of human rights by the media.

Accuracy and consistency of the media presentation of human rights

8. In general, the degree of media reporting of human rights issues in Burundi is not so good. Very often, events are spoken of but not much detail is given. For instance, a report on an attack in the countryside may say “*rebels have killed fifty persons in the Ruyigi province.*” However, it leaves many questions in the listeners’ mind, such as “*what kind of rebels? Where? When? Why? How is it different from previous attacks? Is it a new trend? What does it mean for people living in that place or elsewhere in Burundi?*” From experience, we have already seen that this has a negative impact on the international community and for sure on the community at large in Bujumbura, because these audiences get the idea that the entire countryside is dangerously infected with killers. Reporters should try to be as concise as possible to sound credible.
9. Human rights reporting is often biased, and journalists in general are afraid to criticise the government or its soldiers when they commit atrocities; which renders their stories unbalanced. In Burundi, journalists never accompany government soldiers or rebels to the battlefield. Therefore, they are not able to say precisely who did what among soldiers and rebels. Some media – mainly public ones – simply rely on one official source without trying to verify it. Seldom does one hear the national radio, for instance, saying that the government army has killed civilians. Instead, it often states “*according to military sources, one hundred rebels have been killed during ‘military operations’*” when in fact all these people may be civilians. On the other hand, private media like Studio Ijambo and Radio Umwizero try to get other sources of information, such as the population which witnessed the massacres, human rights organisations and some non-governmental organisations operating in the area where the killing took place.
10. Yet for both public and private media, it takes much time to get the information. Firstly, because the communication system between the capital and the countryside is poor. Secondly, most media do not have enough readily available transportation means to reach places where human rights have been violated before traces get erased, or evidence tampered with.
11. Some other human rights issues are completely ignored by the public media because the government has a responsibility in them. For instance, when, in July 2000, Human Rights Watch issued a report on human rights violations in the regroupment camps in Burundi,² none of the mainstream media (national and independent radio) took up the issues raised in the report. Studio Ijambo was the only member of the Burundi media that examined the report and produced several programmes on it by visiting those mentioned in the document and asking local human rights groups in the country whether they intended to take up the issues raised in the document. Otherwise, only international media (AFP, BBC, RFI, VOA, and Reuters) made reference to it
12. In short, public media (radio and newspapers) often file reports that only meet the interests of the authorities. Newspapers that claim independence usually lack it. Rather, they are under the control of political parties that use them to publicise their opinions, on condition that they ensure their financial survival. Only private media (radio) are trying to improve the human rights coverage, by taking advantage of new trends.

To what extent do new trends affect human rights issues?

13. The most important new trends now are the new communication technologies (in particular electronic mail), the peace process under way in Burundi, and the proliferation of human rights organisations.

² Human Rights Watch, *Emptying the Hills – Regroupment in Burundi*. July 19, 2000.

14. E-mail is tremendously useful in getting the message rapidly to the audience, especially to the diaspora living out of Burundi, and also people residing in Burundi who are interested in these issues. More timely information helps people understand better what is going on locally. Sometimes, this trend helps the international community or any groups interested in human rights issues to react quickly to human rights abuses and compel the author of those abuses to cease their actions.
15. On the negative side, however, because the Internet is so fast, journalists sometimes try to be competitive and send the information quickly without doing deep research and commit mistakes as well, reporting the event incorrectly.
16. The other, equally important development is the negotiation of a peace accord. In the context of that process, human rights have become an extremely sensitive issue in that they have to be taken more seriously. It is no good anymore for a government official or a rebel leader to dismiss a report (by human rights groups) as the ravings of a disaffected or biased organisation. They have to respond more seriously, so in some ways that makes the whole question more relevant and therefore more dangerous to those with power on one side or the other. This also makes the presentation of human rights issues more dangerous to journalists and in turn does not encourage those who work in the state media (particularly) to report in any real way on human rights issues. The peace accord provides enough room for human rights, and it seeks to sanction whoever will violate these rights. It also provides that an international commission will be set up to inquire about crimes against humanity, crimes of genocide, and other serious violations of human rights which have been committed in Burundi so far.
17. The precedents of the International Criminal Tribunals of Rwanda and Yugoslavia demonstrate that perpetrators of serious human rights violations will no longer be left unpunished. The notion is spreading fast that authors of human rights violations *will* be punished. That is the primary reason for which human rights issues start drawing much more attention in Burundi. Indeed people in power do not consider them as a trivial subject, because they know that anyone who will be found guilty of serious human rights crimes will be held accountable. Therefore, journalists will have to present these issues professionally because the impact is important.
18. Thirdly, there are now more local and international human rights organisations in Burundi than in the past. This has a positive impact on human rights reporting because there are many people interested in doing the same thing. As institutions, they prepare reports on human rights issues that some media would never do themselves – out of fear. Therefore, the media base their reports on those of human rights organisations.

New factors affecting human rights reporting

19. By and large, the factors affecting human rights reporting in Burundi now are mainly the activities of some non-governmental organisations, government policies, and the ongoing peace process.
20. Non-governmental organisations working on human rights issues like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, International Alert, and local human right groups have an impact on human rights presentation if their reports are circulated among journalists who can then present the issues to the local and international community. As institutions, these organisations have means and power to organise thorough investigations and come up with credible results. This allows journalists to talk about these reports, being sure that they are credible. Journalists, however, can also serve as source of information to the human rights organisations when they have witnessed or professionally investigated particular cases of human rights violations.

21. As far as the government is concerned, it usually reacts to accusations on human rights violations only if and when the international media mentions them. Otherwise, it keeps quiet. Sometimes, the national media take up a particular event or abuse and the relevant official formulates some vague promises that are seldom followed up by the media. In contradistinction, local private media can draw the government's attention if they professionally raise important human rights issues. For example, when Studio Ijambo started producing radio programmes on the problems that repatriated persons face when they return home, the government realised the importance of that issue and started taking it seriously.
22. The government can also be a negative factor on journalists' work because, very often, it frightens them away from covering human rights abuses for which it is responsible. This threat may affect the willingness of journalists who were potentially interested in human rights coverage.
23. It is not easy to have the government modify such negative behaviour towards media human rights presentation. Many journalists regard their role as simply trying to create a society that is more tolerant and in which atrocities perpetrated by both members of the army and rebel groups are denounced. In 1994 and 1995, people were afraid to address these issues. Slowly, since 1996, they are managing to open-up the discussion and to debate honestly on what is happening. These discussions, usually organised by media, churches and local groups involved in reconciliation among base communities, enhance media human rights presentation. Free debates allow participants to say whatever they think and know about human rights issues; victims of human rights abuses are given a chance to speak up and authors of these abuses to respond. This is a good opportunity for journalists to discover these issues' dimensions, to question the law and those who have to implement it and therefore make a good presentation. This makes it easier for people to know and respect human rights, and therefore become more tolerant, because they can relate to the idea that the others are human beings and deserve those rights. It is a slow process but also one way the media can continue building a more professional reporting mechanism here in Burundi.

International and local coverage

24. Many of the stories that are broadcast in the large international newspapers and wired on Burundi by, among others, the BBC, VOA, and RFI, originate with local journalists based in the country. The biggest impact is in other countries rather than here (more so than the other way around). However, certain reports coming from outside can also have an impact inside Burundi even when they are concerned with the situation in other countries. A report on atrocities in Congo, for example, can spark interest in doing the same report in Burundi if the similar events take place here.
25. Some witnesses of human rights violations prefer to denounce them on an international radio station because they believe that the local media cannot broadcast them. After the international station airs the news, the local media will often try to inquire about it as well. For example, journalists of local media can be afraid of inquiring and broadcasting cases of human right violations in which influential men in power are involved. The local media will feel compelled to talk about the same cases but sometimes with other confusing versions, in order not to betray the person responsible of the abuses. (For instance, the Burundi state radio rarely reports atrocities done by the government army. It always charges rebel groups whereas in reality both the army and armed groups regularly violate human rights.)
26. Apart from such cases, the international coverage does not have much influence on the local media in Burundi. Instead, it has an impact on decision and policy makers of the country where

these human rights abuses have been reported. But when international media summarises a report already made by local coverage they give it more credibility and make it impossible to ignore. Very often it even makes the local and international communities react. Witness the following case.

27. On the night of October 30, 1998, at least one hundred civilians were killed by soldiers of the Tutsi-majority army in the town of Mutambu, located thirty kilometres from Bujumbura. This took place after fighters of the National Liberation Front (FNL), the armed branch of the opposition PALIPEHUTU, had attacked a camp sheltering displaced people, mainly Tutsis. According to eyewitnesses, *“FNL fighters killed six people, wounded one and stole five cows. A few days later, soldiers came and killed many people in broad daylight at Rutovu, a hill about a half a mile from the town.”* During the ten days following this massacre, no radio station or newspaper said a word on it – though some were aware of it. When rumours of this massacre reached Studio Ijambo, a group of Hutu and Tutsi journalists took a vehicle and headed for the reported site of the massacre. The trip was not easy because, under the pretence of insecurity, the army prevented the journalists from reaching the area. Human rights observers were also prevented from going to the scene. Eventually, the Studio Ijambo team reached the place after much persistence. After seeing some bodies and talking to survivors, such as local officials and soldiers who wished to hide their identity for safety reasons, journalists came to the conclusion that more than one hundred civilians had been killed by the national army.
28. Most of these journalists were (and remain) local correspondents of reputed international radio stations and newspapers like the BBC, VOA, RFI, AP, and AFP. When they aired this news, reactions came from everywhere. Although the Burundian army started threatening Studio Ijambo journalists, it ended up admitting to killing thirty civilians. A defence ministry statement read: *“The first estimate put forward a figure of about thirty human lives lost on the Rutovu hill near Mutambu, some thirty kilometres south of Bujumbura, after witnesses told an independent radio station that one hundred civilians had been killed.”* According to the same statement, the deaths were the *“deplorable result of an unfortunate confusion. The killings took place during a military action conducted on November 2 and 3 against the armed wings of the National Council for the Defence of Democracy and PALIPEHUTU, two opposition movements.”* The defence ministry communiqué said an investigation had been *“gathering strength the two days to determine the extent of the killing and who was responsible.”*
29. The other reaction came from the United Nations, which asked for *“swift punishment”* of those, responsible for the massacre in Burundi. The United States Chargé d’Affaires, Peter Burleigh, who was presiding over the UN Security Council, told reporters that the Council *“condemns all attacks against civilians, reiterates the need for all parties to respect human rights and humanitarian law, reminds the government of its responsibilities to protect all its citizens, and encourages the stated intention of the government to investigate the massacre.”*
30. The massacres were also *“resolutely condemned”* by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson. The UN human rights team she sent to Bujumbura was twice denied access to the massacre sites in three days because of what military officials called *“insecurity”* in the region. Mrs. Robinson urged the families of the victims not to seek revenge for the killings and called on authorities to open an investigation on the massacres.
31. The risks taken by the Studio Ijambo journalists in going to the killing scene and inquiring what happened, when, how and by whom, not only informed the local and the international communities but also forced them to react to such ignoble violations of human rights. Eventually, the Burundi government set up an investigative team to identify authors of the massacres but until now they have not been identified. If all media outlets were courageous enough to present human rights violations in a professional way, the situation could certainly improve.

CONCLUSIONS

32. We have so far seen that human rights presentation in Burundi is lacking in quality because journalists either give biased or unbalanced news or refuse to cover some stories for fear of being ill-treated by the government. Therefore, for the sake and respect of their profession, print and broadcast media have to
- be as balanced in their coverage as possible, and give the whole picture of the event so that listeners and readers do not get the idea that only one party commits atrocities. Human rights are very important for everyone and their abuses are not necessarily on one side but on both sides in a conflict; and those who suffer most are the people and the country. So, instead of judging, saying that the countryside is horrible, that it is full of “*genocidaires*” (as public media like to say in Burundi), it is better to show that there are violations on both sides and make them understand that every one has the right to life, liberty and dignity and that these are things that every human being should have;
 - try to explain specific events much better, go deeper, give much more background so that people get a better idea of what happened and the way to prevent it from happening again;
 - be courageous enough to go on coping with negative forces that do not want human rights violations to be denounced. To succeed, journalists must absolutely give balanced reports. They must also profit from having connections with international media so that if one of them is threatened or ill treated because of a report they made, the international media will make that known internationally. So, journalists should not feel or act like isolated individuals but as a united group working together for a better future in the country and internationally;
 - disseminate the culture of tolerance in Burundi by showing that, in this country, there are only three ethnic groups and they have been fighting for years whereas in many other countries more than twenty ethnic groups which have different languages, separate regions, and completely different belief systems live side by side in harmony. (Burundians speak the same language – Kirundi –, have the same religion, and inter-marry among different ethnic groups);
 - try to change the law on press in Burundi because it is far too rigid for journalists. It prevents them from denouncing atrocities committed by some individuals or people in power by arguing that such reports are defamation. This law also threatens journalists with imprisonment or heavy fines;
 - if human rights have been so repeatedly violated it is particularly because of impunity and the passivity of media vis-à-vis that issue. The media’s challenge is, therefore, to fight mercilessly this vice whatever risks there are.
33. Daily reports are not enough to help people understand human rights issues. The media, particularly those working in conflict zones, should also use programmes related to human rights themselves, development and reconciliation in which people say what they have seen and done. Such programmes have a societal focus and they are very beneficial for the population because they help the producer show what human rights are, how they are implemented, what authorities are doing about them and what ordinary people can do. Like daily news, these programmes must also bring issues from both sides so that people can understand that they have problems in common.

34. Studio Ijambo's experience is evidencing that social programmes often raise different reactions when they address sensitive issues. The state radio has often refused to broadcast some of Studio Ijambo's programmes however balanced they were merely because they raised human rights issues involving people in power. Yet other listeners found the programmes positive and encouraged us to go ahead. Therefore, I would recommend to any journalist working in a conflict zone to be willing to take the risk (because it is indeed a risk to report on such events), but try to report it in such way that it is as balanced as possible.
35. Independent radio stations are increasing in Burundi now. They should give enough room to programmes about human rights issues. Some avoid these topics because they are afraid of threats, but they have to keep in mind that their role in changing the society is paramount.
36. Sometimes, members of the media themselves do not know much about human rights and how they have to be implemented and conceived of. It would be a good idea if human rights organisations (local and international) could establish syllabi and organise workshops for members of different media to discuss human rights themselves and their implementation. The same human right organisations should create some radio programmes on human right issues and ensure that they are accurately presented.
37. Similarly, recently international radio stations have started broadcasting on frequency modulation in many countries in Africa. In Burundi, for instance, the BBC and RFI are relayed on FM, and they have a very large audience. Should these outlets schedule programmes on human rights issues, surely they would have a big impact not only on local radio stations but also on their listeners.
38. Last but not least, I suggest that the media should be used to promote human rights in general; to give the message to everyone, in a language that is clear and understandable, that everyone has the right to live in peace and to enjoy all other human rights. This is achieved less by lecturing about universal declarations of human rights than by treating subjects that are important to people in a way that can be easily understood, through stories, songs, plays (soaps), documentaries, and so on.
39. It is worth underlining that the international community has a role to play. Poverty is the mother of vice. I mean that hungry journalists without means cannot work independently and professionally. Some agree to make propaganda for individuals who provide them with some financial means. This is partisan journalism. The international community has to help Burundi get out of the current economic recession and start a new democratic era that better guarantees human rights.
40. Finally, assessment reports like the one we are doing should be done regularly because they help to know the situation of human rights issues and their level of presentation by media in different places of the world and therefore suggest better ways to address them.