

December 19, 2008

## Rwandan Officer Found Guilty of 1994 Genocide

By [LYDIA POLGREEN](#)

ACCRA, Ghana — A senior Rwandan military officer charged with being one of the masterminds of the 1994 [genocide](#) in [Rwanda](#) was convicted on Thursday by a [United Nations](#) court in Tanzania of genocide and sentenced to life in prison.

Col. Theoneste Bagosora, 67, is the most senior military official to have been convicted in connection with the genocide, in which bands of Hutu massacred 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu. He was a leading Hutu extremist and the cabinet director for Rwanda's Defense Ministry at the start of the slaughter. He and three other senior army officers had been on trial since 2002 at the [International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda](#), which is based in Arusha, Tanzania.

In a statement, the United Nations tribunal said it had sentenced Colonel Bagosora and two other Rwandan military officers who were also on trial, Maj. Aloys Ntabakuze and Col. Anatole Nsengiyumva, to life imprisonment for "genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes." A fourth co-defendant, Gen. Gratiien Kabiligi, was acquitted of all charges and released by the court.

The court said Colonel Bagosora was "the highest authority in the Rwandan Defense Ministry, with authority over the military" in the days after the death of [President Juvenal Habyarimana](#) on April 6, 1994.

The president, a Hutu, died when his plane was shot down in Kigali, the Rwandan capital. His death sparked the three-month wave of killing.

The fate of that plane remains a topic of great controversy and speculation. Hutu militants blamed Tutsi rebels for shooting it down and argued that the killings that followed were the spontaneous rage of average Rwandans.

The Tutsi rebels have argued that the militant Hutu, perhaps with France's help, may have been involved, hoping to create the pretext for a long-planned extermination of the Tutsi. Rwanda has threatened senior French officials with indictments, while France has responded by seeing to the arrest of a top aide to [Paul Kagame](#), the Rwandan president, in connection with the crash.

The speed and violence of the genocide was evident in the court's findings.

It ruled that the day after the plane attack in 1994 Colonel Bagosora was responsible for the killing of the Rwandan prime minister, Agathe Uwilingiyimana; the president of the Constitutional Court, Joseph Kavaruganda; and three top opposition figures: Frederic Nzamurambaho, Landoald Ndasingwa and Faustin Rucogoza. These events set the stage for the slaughter that was to follow.

Colonel Bagosora was also found guilty in connection with the killing of 10 Belgian peacekeepers by soldiers at Camp Kigali, and in the organized killings by soldiers and militiamen throughout Kigali and Gisenyi, in the west of the country.

However, the court cleared Colonel Bagosora and the others on trial of conspiring to commit genocide before April 7, 1994. The trial lasted six years, during which 242 witnesses were heard.

The charges against General Kabiligi were dismissed after he provided an alibi, and “it was also not proven that he had operational authority or that he targeted civilians,” the court said.

The exclusion of the conspiracy charge against the men is a blow to Rwandan officials, said Alison Desforges of [Human Rights Watch](#), because it undercuts their argument that the genocide was not a one-time event but the inevitable product of an anti-Tutsi atmosphere dating from the colonial era.

“It brings us back to reality and says this genocide was a discrete historical event related to a specific set of circumstances,” Ms. Desforges said.

Human rights officials hailed the conviction of Colonel Bagosora, calling it a strike against impunity but also a reminder to anyone committing atrocities in armed conflict. It has particular resonance for the belligerents spawning chaos in eastern Congo, said Paul van Zyl of the [International Center for Transitional Justice](#), a rights group based in New York.

“The conviction should send a signal to all people with ongoing responsibility for atrocities in Congo,” he said. “If they are in effective control of armed forces, whether they are state troops, a rebel group or guerrillas, they are potentially criminally liable.”

Given the mounting evidence that Rwanda is playing a role in backing the renegade Congolese general [Laurent Nkunda](#), that warning could apply to the men who claim credit for ending the genocide and now govern Rwanda, said René Lemarchand, an Africa scholar who has been writing about the troubled Great Lakes region for decades.

General Nkunda says he is fighting to protect a Tutsi minority from the Hutu militiamen who fled Rwanda and remain hidden in Congo’s sprawling forests.

“Everybody has dirty hands” in eastern Congo, Mr. Lemarchand said. “But I think it is a good time to take our distance toward Rwanda and recognize there is still an awful lot of dirty linen to be washed.”

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