

Burundi: Terence Nahimana (m)

Concern: Prisoner of conscience

Peace activist Terence Nahimana is facing charges that could potentially see him jailed for up to 20 years. The government has recently been harassing and intimidating human rights defenders, especially those who criticise it, and Amnesty International is concerned that numerous other people are now at risk of imprisonment simply for exercising their right to freedom of expression.

Terence Nahimana is the director of the NGO Cercle d'initiative pour une vision commune (CIVIC), which works to promote peace and conflict resolution in Burundi. On 5 May, he wrote a letter to President Pierre Nkurunziza, saying that the government was deliberately delaying peace negotiations with the last armed opposition group operating in the country. He claimed that this group, the Forces Nationales de Liberation (FNL), National Liberation Forces, has a presence in the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo, and that the government was planning to use this as an excuse to move troops into that country. The following day he gave a press conference where he expressed the same views. The FNL signed a ceasefire agreement with the government on 7 September.

He also said that the government was hindering talks with the UN aimed at establishing a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to address the alleged past war crimes and crimes against humanity. Nahimana argued that the government was afraid that some of its own members could be indicted by such a Commission.

He was arrested on 9 May by the national intelligence service, the Documentation Nationale. He was released after three hours of questioning, but the following day he was arrested again, and held at their headquarters in the capital, Bujumbura. On 15 May he was formally charged by the public prosecutor with "threatening state security", under articles 404 and 428 of the Burundian penal code. These articles deal with "exposing Burundi to foreign hostility" and "incitement of the population against the government or incitement to civil war". Terence Nahimana is now held in Mpimba central prison, in Bujumbura.

The trial of Terence Nahimana started on 23 November 2006. Sources have told Amnesty International that it may take at least two months before he is sentenced. If found guilty of the charges, Terence could receive a sentence of up to eight years imprisonment.

Amnesty International considers him a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for the peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of expression, as guaranteed by the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Burundi is a state party to both.

Please write to the authorities:

- expressing grave concern that peace activist Terence Nahimana has been detained on charges of "threatening state security", apparently for criticising the government;
- urging the authorities to release him immediately and unconditionally, as he is a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for exercising his right to freedom of expression;
- reminding the authorities that Burundi is a state party to both the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which guarantee the right to freedom of expression.

Please send appeals to:

President Pierre Nkurunziza
President de la Republique
Boulevard de l'Uprona
Rohero I
BP 1870, Bujumbura, Burundi