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RWANDA

Death of human rights activist André Sibomana

Amnesty International has learned with deep sadness the death of André Sibomana -- one of Rwanda's leading human rights activists. He died today at Kabgayi, in Gitarama, central Rwanda, after an illness of several weeks.

André Sibomana -- a Roman Catholic priest and a journalist -- was known and respected above all as a staunch and uncompromising defender of human rights and a defender of the truth, in a country where the most basic rights are violated daily on a massive scale and where the truth is often obscured by propaganda from all sides. Under successive governments in Rwanda, André Sibomana denounced without fear the abuses of those in authority -- before, during and after the genocide which claimed as many as one million lives in Rwanda in 1994. He devoted his life to helping the vulnerable and the voiceless, from all walks of life.

He was born in Rwanda in 1954 and trained as a priest and a journalist. He became the editor of the Catholic newspaper *Kinyamateka* and held this post for several years. In a climate of repression and censorship, *Kinyamateka* has been one of the few independent voices of journalism in Rwanda, unafraid of reporting truthfully on the situation in the country, exposing human rights violations when they occurred and engaging in debates on controversial issues.

As a priest and acting bishop in the Roman Catholic diocese of Kabgayi in the central region of Gitarama, André Sibomana consistently fought for the rights of ordinary citizens of Rwanda to be respected, regardless of their background, gender, profession, ethnic group or place of origin. As administrator of the diocese, he also provided practical help and humanitarian relief to those in need. Within the establishment of which he was a part, he was not afraid to criticize the role of certain elements within the Roman Catholic church who had actively or passively contributed to Rwanda's cycle of human rights violations, or who had not been willing to speak out against state violence.

In addition to his work as a priest and a journalist, André Sibomana held for several years the post of President of the *Association rwandaise pour la défense des droits de la personne et des libertés publiques* (Rwandese Association for the Defence of Human Rights and Public Liberties), ADL, which was created in 1991. As President of the ADL, he worked tirelessly to encourage independent investigations into reports of human rights violations committed by state agents and armed opposition groups and ensured that the organization issued public statements on their findings. He also played a critical role in the *Collectif des ligues et associations de défense des droits de l'homme* (CLADHO), the collective of human rights organizations of which ADL is a member.

His work as an outspoken human rights activist over the years attracted virulent criticism and direct threats from individuals or organizations seeking to conceal the scale of human rights violations in Rwanda. The fact that he had unambiguously denounced abuses by both the government of former President Juvénal Habyarimana until 1994 and the government formed by the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF) after the genocide confused and irritated many who sought to portray the situation in Rwanda as a clear-cut battle between good and evil. He had also criticized the international community and was known to be unforgiving in his remarks towards foreign governments and international organizations who failed in their responsibility to prevent massacres in Rwanda.

Under the previous and the present governments of Rwanda - André Sibomana narrowly escaped several abduction and assassination attempts. Yet these threats and intimidation did not deter him but rather sharpened his sensitivities and increased his determination to protect and promote human rights.

André Sibomana can never be replaced, but the memory of this remarkable man -- his courage, his devotion, his perseverance and his humanity -- will serve as an inspiration to those inside and outside Rwanda who are committed to restoring respect for human rights in the country.
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