

BURUNDI Gabriel Nikundana, journalist

Radio journalist Gabriel Nikundana is being held incommunicado at a national intelligence agency in the capital, Bujumbura. Amnesty International fears that he may be tortured or ill-treated.

Gabriel Nikundana, who works with *Bonesha FM+*, an independent Burundian radio station, and as a correspondent with *Deutschwelle*, a German radio station, has been held at the *Documentation nationale*, National Intelligence Agency, since 12 March. The *Documentation nationale*, a security service responsible to the president, does not have legal powers to detain suspects. However, it frequently holds detainees incommunicado, and many are tortured.

Gabriel Nikundana was arrested on 7 March after *Bonesha FM+* broadcast an interview with Anicet Ntawuhiganayo, the spokesperson for an armed opposition group, the *Forces nationales de libération* (FNL), National Liberation Forces, which was then occupying parts of the capital. During the interview, the FNL spokesperson set out six pre-conditions for entering into negotiations with the current government, and denied rumours of an alliance with another armed opposition group. Gabriel Nikundana appears to have been arrested solely for carrying out his legitimate professional activities, and as such is considered a prisoner of conscience. The *Documentation nationale* have also contacted the directors of *Bonesha FM+* and *Radio Publique Africaine*, another independent radio station which also broadcast an interview with the FNL spokesperson, but did not arrest either.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The authorities are increasingly harassing the Burundian press, and Gabriel Nikundana's arrest is only the latest incident in what appears to be a growing pattern. On 4 March 2001, the government issued a press statement in which it called on private and state media to "respect the code of conduct, morality and the law" (*à respecter la déontologie, la morale et la loi*) and warned that failure to do so would be severely punished. On 5 March, President Buyoya warned journalists at a press conference against putting out enemy propaganda and "of playing the enemy's game" (*de faire le jeu de l'ennemi*).

On 10 March, at least three journalists were threatened or harassed as they tried to get to Bujumbura airport to interview Epitace Bayaganakandi, a presidential candidate put forward by a coalition of opposition parties. At a roadblock about three kilometres from the airport, Léon Masengo, who also works for *Bonesha FM+*, was beaten by gendarmes, apparently on the orders of two *Documentation nationale* agents. Two other journalists, Jacqueline Segahungu from *Radio Publique Africaine* and Jean-Pierre Aimé Harerimana, a Reuters cameraman, were threatened with violence.

The FNL launched a sustained assault on Bujumbura on 24 February, and occupied parts of the city for several days before withdrawing around 10 March. The number of people killed, civilian or military, is not known. Few human rights abuses, either by the FNL or government armed forces, both of which have poor human rights records, were reported during the attack. However, the situation remains very tense. There are reports that unoccupied houses in the Kinama

area have been looted, some apparently with the complicity or active participation of members of the armed forces.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in French or your own language (please check that postal services are operating to Burundi from your country):

- calling for the unconditional release of prisoner of conscience Gabriel Nikundana, who has been arrested solely for carrying out his legitimate professional activities;
- calling for the authorities to guarantee his safety while he is detained, and to ensure that he is given immediate access to relatives, medical care, lawyers and human rights organizations;
- expressing concern at what appears to be a growing pattern of attacks on journalists and freedom of expression, and calling for the assault against Léon Masengo to be investigated and those responsible brought to justice.

APPEALS TO (Please note, it can be difficult to get through on the numbers given below, and you may be told by the operator that they are temporarily out of order. Please be patient and keep trying):

Head of State

Son Excellence

Major Pierre BUYOYA

Président de la République

Présidence de la République

BP 1870 Bujumbura, Burundi

Telegrams:President, Bujumbura, Burundi

Faxes:+ 257 22 74 90

Salutation: Monsieur le Président de la République / Dear President

Minister of Internal Affairs and Public Security

Col. Ascension TWAGIRAMUNGU

Ministre de l'Intérieur et de la Sécurité Publique

Ministère de l'Intérieur

Bujumbura, Burundi

Telegrams:Ministre Interieur, Bujumbura, Burundi

Faxes: + 257 22 19 82

Salutation: Monsieur le Ministre / Dear Minister

Minister of National Defence

Colonel Cyrille NDAYIRUKIYE

Ministre de la Défense Nationale

Ministère de la Défense Nationale

BUJUMBURA, Burundi

Telegrams:Ministre Defense, Bujumbura, Burundi

Faxes: + 257 22 56 86

Salutation:Monsieur le Ministre / Dear Minister

Procureur Général de la République

Monsieur Gérard NGENDABANKA

Procureur Général de la République

Bujumbura

Burundi

Telegrams:Procureur general, Bujumbura, Burundi

Fax: + 257 24 15 03

Salutation: Monsieur le Procureur général de la République / Dear State Public Prosecutor

COPIES TO:

Minister for Human Rights, Institutional Reform and Relations with the National Assembly

Eugène NINDORERA, Ministre des droits de la Personne humaine, des réformes institutionnelles, et des relations avec l'Assemblée nationale, Ministère des droits de la Personne humaine, des réformes institutionnelles, et des relations avec l'Assemblée nationale, Bujumbura, Burundi

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and to diplomatic representatives of BURUNDI accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 25 April 2001.