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Burundi: Activists write in solidarity on the Ernest Manirumva campaign

Amnesty International activists from around the world are today calling on the Burundian authorities to bring to justice all those responsible for the killing of Ernest Manirumva, an anti-corruption advocate stabbed to death in April 2009.

Ernest Manirumva was vice president of the Burundian civil society organization Anti-corruption and Economic Malpractice Observatory (OLUCOME) and vice president of an official body that regulates public procurement. Shortly before his death, according to his colleagues and friends, Ernest Manirumva had been investigating cases of police corruption and police attempts to purchase firearms illegally from Malaysia.

A trial started at the Bujumbura Court of Appeal in Burundi on 14 July 2010. There are a dozen suspects in total, including police, civilians and demobilized combatants. The date for the next hearing was repeatedly delayed on the grounds that summons to detainees not in custody had not been delivered. On 15 December 2010, OLUCOME stated that the trial is now scheduled for 19 January at the Appeals Court in Bujumbura.

Members of civil society organizations who have publicly denounced the killing and the failings of the judicial inquiries into the case have themselves received threats. Both Pierre Claver Mbonimpa, president of the Association for the Protection of Human Rights and Detained Persons (APRODH), and Gabriel Rufyiri, president of OLUCOME, received a tip from an informant in March 2010 that state agents were preparing to assassinate one of them by orchestrating a car accident. In November 2009, Pacifique Nininahazwe of the Forum for the Strengthening of Civil Society (FORSC) received warning of a plot to assassinate him.

FORSC was then banned by an ordinance issued by the Interior Minister, who cited alleged technical problems with the forum's official registration documents from 2006. Though the minister subsequently "suspended" the ordinance, FORSC's legal status has not yet been clarified. On two occasions in 2009, Burundian organizations were forbidden by government officials from organizing a march in the capital, Bujumbura, to call for justice for Manirumva. When civil society organizations made statements in late 2009 suggesting that the government investigatory commission was not pursuing all leads, Interior Minister Edouard Nduwimana summoned them to his office and accused them of "interfering with the work of the justice system."

The trial has inspired Amnesty International members and other civil society activists from around the world to write messages of solidarity to four human rights defenders spearheading the "Justice for Ernest Manirumva" campaign. The messages were addressed to four human rights defenders who have been harassed and intimidated because of their work on the Ernest Manirumva campaign, including Pierre Claver Mbonimpa of APRODH, Gabriel Rufyiri of OLUCOME and Pacifique Nininahazwe and Solange Habonimana of FORSC. The messages offered strong support to the human rights defenders and encouraged the Burundian authorities to guarantee that civil society activists can operate freely and independently without risking their lives or security.

People from all walks of life wrote messages of solidarity. Students, teachers, homemakers, human rights defenders, retired people, doctors, trade unionists, office workers, musicians,

nurses, journalists, jurists, psychologists, social workers, priests and artists all offered their support for the human rights defenders with heartfelt messages.

“We are dismayed to hear of the ordeals of intimidation, threats and harassment against you by the Burundian authorities whose only goal is to hinder your work as human rights defenders.” wrote Nidoh from Ivory Coast.

“I hope with all my heart that the murder of Manirumva will not remain unpunished. Whatever follows, his immense courage and yours are already a victory against all those who would stifle the Burundian people.” stated Yves from France.

“Manirumva’s trial has captivated me, because when human beings pay with their lives for the defence of human rights, which are everybody’s rights, I find it essential for all of us to remain in solidarity, no matter the distance separating us.” wrote Marie-Hélène from Belgium.

Background

The Burundian government took some steps to identify those responsible for the killing, but Burundian civil society groups have consistently criticized the authorities for failing to adequately follow up leads.

A first judicial commission was set up by the National Police of Burundi soon after the killing. However it was criticized by civil society on the grounds that the police could not investigate a crime that they were alleged to be behind. A second commission was established and was comprised of both prosecutors and police. However, after civil society organizations denounced the commission’s inaction and its president’s close relationship with the head of the National Intelligence Service, which was cited by some witnesses as having played a role in the crime, the prosecutor general dissolved the commission. He replaced it in October 2009 with a third commission whose members were more active in pursuing the investigation and who were seen by civil society groups as having less questionable relationships with members of the security forces. The government accepted an offer from the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to provide technical assistance in the investigation. The third commission was more cooperative, allowing FBI agents to help interview, fingerprint, and do DNA testing of suspects. However, the commission failed to interrogate high-ranking police and intelligence officials who were reportedly implicated by witnesses.

At least three members of the police who might have been able to provide information have been killed or have disappeared. Three weeks after Manirumva was killed, on 30 April, a police captain, Pacifique Ndikuriyo, was shot dead in Bujumbura. In March 2010, a police officer named Ezéchiel Coyishakiye disappeared from a mental hospital where he was held under armed guard after having been arrested in connection with another crime, and police say they do not know his whereabouts. Amnesty International received reports that another police officer alleged to be involved with the crime has fled the country. The investigatory commission examined claims by witnesses that all three of these individuals may have been directly involved in, or had knowledge about, the killing. Furthermore, a demobilized combatant charged with playing a role in the crime fled to Canada.

Since August 2010, just under 3,000 messages have already been sent from people across the world in Algeria, Bahrain, Belgium, Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Canada, Colombia, Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Ivory Coast, Japan, Luxembourg, Morocco, Mexico, Monaco, Norway, the Netherlands, New Caledonia, Poland, Portugal, Senegal, Spain, Switzerland, Togo, Tunisia, the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Uruguay. All messages were sent to:

manirumva_campaign@yahoo.com.

The campaign is a public campaign and anyone is encouraged to write in solidarity.

Public Document

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