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Rwanda: Peace workers are victims of increasing political repression

"Amnesty International today called for the immediate and unconditional release of three peace and reconciliation activists – Laurien Ntezimana, Didace Muremangingo and Ignace Ndayahundwa – arrested by police and held at Butare central prison, southern Rwanda, on 27 January and 2 February.

All three men are members of the Association Modeste et Innocent (AMI), the Modeste and Innocent Association, a Rwandese non-governmental organization working to promote individual dignity and national peace and reconciliation. A fourth female member of AMI was also briefly detained but later released. Laurien Ntezimana, president of AMI, has been refused all visits in detention.

The authorities have not disclosed what charges the men may face, but their arrest is believed to relate to the use of the word "ubuyanja" ("renewal" or "rebirth of energy") in a recent issue of the Ubuntu bulletin published by AMI. The bulletin contains an editorial by Laurien Ntezimana explaining the meaning of the word "ubuyanja" and why AMI uses it. The men are also reportedly being questioned about the mission of AMI, the reasons behind its creation and whether or not AMI had the necessary authorizations to operate legally in Rwanda.

The word "ubuyanja" has recently become associated with a banned political opposition party, the Parti Démocratique pour le Renouveau-Ubuyanja (PDR-Ubuyanja), Democratic Party for Renewal-Ubuyanja. The three detainees are not believed to have any

connection with PDR-Ubuyanja. The concept of "ubuyanja" has long been a central tenet of Laurien Ntezimana and AMI's program for peace and reconciliation.

These latest detentions are part of a growing pattern of harassment by the authorities of individuals suspected of supporting political opposition in Rwanda and of journalists who report on developments.

"The Rwandese authorities seem determined to stifle any suggestion, however tenuous, of peaceful political dissent," Amnesty International said. "In doing so they are resorting to unlawful detentions and violating the fundamental right to peaceful freedom of expression."

"In the absence of recognizable criminal charges, supported by credible evidence, these three prisoners of conscience should be immediately set free. The Rwandese Government should publicly renew its commitment, made under international treaties, to upholding the right to freedom of expression," the organization added.

Background

AMI was founded in February 2000 in commemoration of the work of Modeste Mungwarareba, a Catholic priest, and Innocent Samusoni who devoted themselves to promoting reconciliation between Hutu and Tutsi in the Butare region of southern Rwanda. Modeste Mungwarareba died in May 1999. Innocent Samusoni was killed during the genocide in April 1994. Laurien Ntezimana is a long-standing and well-known peace activist who in 1998 was awarded the Pax Christi International "Prize for Peace".

The PDR-Ubuyanja party, founded in May 2001 by the former president Pasteur Bizimungu, was banned in June 2001. Journalists who interviewed Pasteur Bizimungu at the time were interrogated, threatened and forced to hand over tape recordings to the military authorities. Several individuals associated with the party have since been detained or intimidated. On 26 December 2001 one of the PDR-Ubuyanja's founders, Gratien Munyarubuga, was shot dead in Kigali by unidentified assailants. Catherine Mujawamaliya, secretary of PDR-Ubuyanja, was held without charge at Remera police station in Kigali from 10 December until last week. Members of her family were allegedly killed by Rwandese Patriotic Front soldiers in August 1994. Her repeated calls for those responsible for the killings to be brought to justice may have been a factor in her prolonged and illegal detention. Until her release, Amnesty International considered her a prisoner of conscience.

Members of a faction of a legal opposition party, the *Mouvement Démocratique Républicain* (MDR), Democratic Republican Movement, have also been targeted by the authorities. The secretary-general of MDR, Pierre Gakwindi, has been detained in Kigali central prison since 4 January 2002, accused of giving a press interview considered "ethnically divisive" and defamatory of serving government officials. Amnesty International believes that the charges against him are politically motivated and that he may be a prisoner of conscience arrested solely because of his opposition to the government.

Amiel Nkuriza, editor of the independent French-language Le Partisan newspaper, was recently forced to flee abroad following sustained harassment by the authorities. He was detained for four days from 31 December 2001 for an editorial that dealt with the political situation in Rwanda and was reportedly threatened by police officers at the time of his release. On 4 January, he was interrogated about an article he wrote for the independent Kinyarwanda newspaper, Umuseso, on the killing of Gratién Munyarubaga. Le Partisan and Umuseso -- both well-respected newspapers -- have been regular targets for public denunciations issued by members of the government.

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