

Planner of Rwandan genocide convicted

Written by Anton Barnard

Friday, 26 December 2008 11:43 - Last Updated Saturday, 14 February 2009 23:31

A former Rwandan Army colonel behind the 1994 slaughter of more than 500,000 people was convicted of genocide Thursday and sentenced to life in prison, the most significant verdict of a U.N. tribunal set up to bring the killers to justice.

Col. Theoneste Bagosora was found guilty of crimes against humanity, and the court said he used his position as director of Rwanda's Ministry of Defense to direct Hutu soldiers to kill Tutsis and moderate Hutus.

Former military commanders Anatole Nsengiyumva and Aloys Ntabakuze also were found guilty of genocide and sentenced to life in prison. The former chief of military operations, Brigadier Gratien Kabiligi, was cleared of all charges and released.

"It's been a very important day in the tribunal here with judgments given in respect of very important cases which shed a lot of light on really what happened on that fateful day, on 6th April 1994, and the few days following thereafter," Hassan Bubacar Jallow, chief prosecutor at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, told French international news channel France 24.

The court said that Bagosora "was the highest authority in the Rwandan Ministry of Defense with authority over the Rwandan military" and was responsible for the deaths of former Rwandan Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana and 10 Belgian peacekeepers who tried to protect her as she was killed at the outset of the genocide.

Bagosora, 67, said nothing as the verdict was delivered Thursday, and there was complete silence from the scores of people who had packed into the aisles of the tiny courtroom to hear the judgment.

His conviction was welcomed by genocide survivors, who still live uneasily among perpetrators in the central African nation nearly 15 years later.

Some 63,000 people are suspected of taking part in the genocide, although many of them have been sentenced by community-based courts, where suspects were encouraged to confess and seek forgiveness in exchange for lighter sentences.

"Bagosora ... is the person behind all the massacres," said Jean Paul Rurangwa, 32, who lost his father and two sisters. "The fact that he was sentenced to the biggest punishment the court can give is a relief." U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon welcomed conviction, U.N. spokeswoman Marie

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Okabe said at U.N. headquarters in New York.

"These judgments constitute a major step in the fight against the impunity of those responsible for the most serious crimes of international concern," Ban's spokeswoman said.

The Tanzania-based International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda was set up by the U.N. in 1994 to try those responsible for the killings and had its first conviction in 1997. There have been 42 judgments, of which six have been acquittals. It does not have the power to impose the death sentence.

Eighteen trials remain under way but none of the defendants is as senior as Bagosora. His lawyer, Raphael Constant, has said he will appeal the verdict within a 30-day deadline.

More than 500,000 minority Tutsis and political moderates from the Hutu majority were killed in the 100-day slaughter organized by the extremist Hutu government then in power. Government troops, Hutu militia and ordinary villagers spurred on by hate messages broadcast over the radio went from village to village, butchering men, women and children.

Bagosora was captured in Cameroon in 1996 and has been in custody in Tanzania since 1997.

Reed Brody, a specialist in international justice for Human Rights Watch, said the sentence sent a clear message to other world leaders accused of crimes against humanity and genocide, like Sudanese

President Omar al-Bashir. "It says watch out. Justice can catch up with you," Brody said. "The authors of genocide can and will be punished by the international community." According to the indictment, Bagosora had participated in international talks arranged in the early 1990s with the aim of ending Rwanda's long-simmering political crisis. Bagosora grew angry with government delegates he deemed soft on Tutsi-led rebels and said he was returning to Rwanda to "prepare the apocalypse," the indictment quoted Bagosora as saying.

The killings began on April 7, 1994, the day after a plane carrying ethnic Hutu President Juvenal Habyarimana was shot down by unidentified attackers on its approach to Kigali airport. Bagosora was commander of the Kanombe air base in Kigali when the president's plane went down.

Hours after the crash, militants from the Hutu ethnic majority known as Interahamwe set up roadblocks across Kigali and the next day began killing Tutsis and moderate Hutus. The slaughter eventually ended after Tutsi rebels invaded from neighboring Uganda and drove out the genocidal forces.

Also Thursday, Protais Zigiranyirazo, 70, was convicted of organizing a massacre in which hundreds of Tutsis died, and was sentenced to 20 years. Zigiranyirazo - the brother-in-law of the Rwandan president who was killed in the 1994 plane crash - gets credit for seven years already served in prison.

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The chief prosecutor at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda said "it would appear to me that 20 years for a genocide may be on the low side." "We are reviewing that aspect of it and will eventually decide whether to pursue an appeal against the sentence or not," Jallow told France 24.

Chris Hennemeyer, who worked as a relief worker in Rwanda and is a vice president at the U.S.-based International Foundation for Electoral Systems, said "the important thing is that he's behind bars and at his age he won't get out until he's very elderly."

Associated Press writers Katharine Houreld in Nairobi, Kenya, Joelle Diderich in Paris, and Edith M. Lederer at the United Nations contributed to this report.