

Rwanda is blocking investigations of former rebels despite pledges, prosecutor says

The Guardian, April 5, 2002

The international tribunal for Rwanda is to bring its first charges against Tutsis accused of murdering Hutus during the 1994 genocide, despite Kigali's attempts to block the investigations.

More than 80 Hutu leaders have been indicted for their role in the mass murder of hundreds of thousands of Tutsis that began eight years ago this week. But so far no Tutsis fighting with the Rwandan Patriotic Front rebel army, which overthrew the Hutu extremist regime, have been charged, despite growing pressure for the victors also to be held accountable for their crimes.

Carla del Ponte, the chief prosecutor of the tribunal which sits in Arusha, Tanzania, said yesterday she was investigating massacres of Hutu civilians by Tutsi soldiers during 1994 and would hand down the first indictments before the end of the year.

"We have opened investigations

into three massacres. I have spoken to [Rwanda's president] Paul Kagame. I showed him a list of massacres and said we will be investigating. I said that if Rwanda wants justice and peace there must be accountability on both sides," she said. But she said General Kagame had not delivered on a pledge to cooperate, and most of the tribunal's investigations into the massacres had taken place outside Rwanda.

"Cooperation inside Rwanda has been very difficult, despite the promises of the president," Mrs del Ponte said.

The investigation is politically sensitive because some Hutu leaders have argued that the massacre of Tutsis was an act of self-defence. Others have sought to equate the killings on each side, to diminish the genocide.

Mrs del Ponte declined to say which killings she was investigating, but Human Rights Watch has docu-

mented several massacres of women and children by the rebels in 1994, including one of hundreds of people in Byumba stadium.

"The crimes committed by RPF soldiers were so systematic and widespread and took place over so long a period of time that commanding officers must have been aware of them," it said in its report on the genocide.

The Tutsi rebels also executed without trial enemy soldiers and militiamen who were suspected of murder. The RPF has long acknowledged that its troops were responsible for the death of the Catholic archbishop of Kigali, Vincent Nsengiyumva, who was once a member of the Hutu extremist government and complicit in the genocide.

The Rwandan government has arrested a few dozen soldiers for killing civilians, including a major who was sentenced to life in prison. But the in-

ternational tribunal's brief is to hunt down those responsible for organising and overseeing mass murder, not ordinary killers.

The latest Hutu extremist detained by the international tribunal appeared in court yesterday to answer charges that his songs amounted to incitement to genocide. Simon Bikindi was one of Rwanda's most famous singers and his music was played repeatedly on the hate radio station Radio Mille Collines during the slaughter, interspersed with encouragement to get on with the killings. Mr Bikindi, 48, laughed during his committal hearing yesterday as details of his alleged crimes were read out, including accusations that he was a commander of the notorious "interahamwe" militia.

He pleaded not guilty to five charges of genocide, crimes against humanity and murder.