

Terrorists with a fan club

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Several years after the genocide in Rwanda those suspected of planning and carrying it out are taking on the appearance of political opposition. And they are gaining support. Could the terrorists of today take courage from this phenomenon?

In March 1994, Belgian Lieutenant Luc Lemaire is put in charge of a company of UN peacekeepers in Kicukiro, a suburb of Kigali, the capital of Rwanda. The blue berets are in Rwanda to monitor the implementation of a peace treaty between the government of Hutu president Juvenal Habyarimana and the rebel army of Tutsi refugees led by Paul Kagame.

During those first months of 1994 the tension is mounting. Extremists try to sabotage the peace agreement. Several politicians are assaulted and at least 23 people are killed in Kicukiro towards the end of February.

A month later there are still a few hundred Tutsi in the parish church of Kicukiro, hiding from the militiamen patrolling outside. One of Lemaire's first priorities is to establish the identities of the leading terrorists in the neighbourhood and the kinds of weapons they possess. Three days before the outbreak of the genocidal violence he manages to obtain a list with the

names of armed extremists, some of whom are leaders of the local Interahamwe militia.

Most are in possession of an R4, an automatic rifle of South African origin. One extremist owns a Kalashnikov, some have grenades as well. According to Lemaire's informer, the terrorists have received the weapons for an attack on the church. On the top of the list is "Nzinga, Jean Claude, son of the Counsellor". After the genocide his name will turn up in reports of human rights organizations and at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR).

A new life

In The Netherlands we know Nzinga as Jean Claude Iyamuremye from Voorburg. Just like many other genocide suspects he has managed to build a new life here without raising suspicion. When his past finally catches up with him and he is suddenly taken to prison, his friends are completely stunned. Disbelief prevails.

The disbelief soon changes to denial. Could Jean Claude be the victim of political games, people wonder. After all, he is friends with Victoire Ingabire from Zevenhuizen who is the leader of a Rwandan opposition party in exile. They start a petition for Jean

Claude's release. "The testimonies are false", the website states, and : "He is innocent." This seems to be a common reaction in the cases of genocide suspects.

Their friends and acquaintances can't connect the situation they are familiar with in Holland to the reality of Rwanda back in 1994. This is also the case with Jean Baptiste Mugimba from Leusden. Mugimba's name comes up multiple times in the archives of the ICTR, in newspaper articles, letters, radio tapes, video recordings, expert reports and testimonies.

According to these documents Mugimba was a leading figure in the Coalition for the Defense of the Republic, an extremist party that called for the extermination of the Tutsi during rallies and demonstrations and whose militia played a major role in the massacres. The available evidence should promote a rational response to his arrest but even Mugimba can rely on the unconditional support of a part of his social circle.

Confessant

Father Peter, a Catholic priest who has known Mugimba for sixteen years, expresses his bewilderment in a written response. "It came as a complete surprise to all who knew Jean Baptiste when he was lifted from his bed and taken to jail," he explains. "It was unthinkable to me that the allegations could be true." "Jean Baptiste was a confessant of mine", the priest elaborates. "During confessions – to which he obviously came voluntarily – nothing was ever discussed that remotely resembled what he was accused of. It would be illogical for Jean Baptiste to come to confession and then conceal

his greatest sins."

Theories abound to explain Mugimba's arrest. Ms. Jonkers, a French interpreter who knows Mugimba's son, is under the impression that commercial motives caused the arrest : "I believe there is a secret agreement with Rwanda," she says. "The Netherlands extradite the dissidents and get economic services in return. I cannot prove it, but I'd stake my life on it."

Open letter

The Support Fund for Refugees in Leusden (SSVL) has published an open letter to the Dutch Ministry of Justice pleading for Mugimba's release. In the letter, Sjef Kemps, the president of the SSVL, argues that his innocence has already been established. "Mr. Mugimba's lawyers have already proved that the allegations are unwarranted," he writes.

Mr. Kemps is convinced that Mugimba is the victim of political games. "The accusation of genocide is the easiest and fastest way to get opposition members back to Rwanda and shut them up," according to Kemps, who prefers not to comment on the incriminating documents. Mugimba himself suspects "a dirty political game" behind the accusations, resulting from his financial support for the political activities of Victoire Ingabire.

Ties with Victoire Ingabire are also used as an excuse by Pierre-Claver Karangwa, a janitor from Ermelo. But, according to former prosecutor and human rights activist François Xavier Nsanzuwera, Karangwa had been part of a death squad as early as 1990. He was charged with the assassination of three members of the family of Silas

Majyambere, a critic of president Habyarimana.

In the following years Karangwa was part of the military commission that, according to Human Rights Watch and many scholars, defined the Tutsi ethnic group as the enemy of the Hutu. Witnesses claim he was actively involved in the genocide at two locations. Karangwa's response : "I am the victim of a politically motivated slander campaign by Rwanda's dictatorial government."

In recent years Karangwa has been the head of security of Victoire Ingabire's political party. The number of genocide suspects with a connection to Ingabire is impressive. Among them are current and former board members of her political party and a former assistant, Joseph Ntawangundi, who was convicted of involvement in several murders during the genocide. As an exception to the rule, Ntawangundi confessed and is currently serving 17 years in prison.

Victoire Ingabire

The question arises whether all these people were wrongly accused because of their links with Ingabire or if there is a reason for Ingabire to be surrounded by so many genocide suspects, both in her political activities and in her personal life. What do we really know about her? Victoire Ingabire is currently serving a prison sentence in Rwanda, where she was convicted for 'conspiracy against the authorities through terror and war' and for 'minimizing the genocide'.

The latter count has been the subject of considerable media attention and is often criticized as stifling the political opposition. To her supporters In-

gabire is therefore a political prisoner. The media stories about Ingabire also tend to recycle critical remarks by human rights organizations that are related to other parts of her original indictment, although Ingabire was acquitted on some of those counts. By focusing on the critical comments, the 'conspiracy through terror and war' has largely disappeared from the public debate.

Ingabire's neighbour from Zevenhuizen, Frans Zwanenburg, runs the support group FFDR. Zwanenburg organizes demonstrations in The Hague for her release and he raises funds to pay her lawyers. The Reformed and Catholic churches of the Zevenhuizen area, as well as the local public broadcasting organization 'Omrøep Zuidplas', have joined in the activities for Ingabire's release.

The question whether these activities are in accordance with the tasks of a publicly funded broadcasting organization does not yield a clear answer. The news editor of Omrøep Zuidplas, Marien Mulder, provides the following reason for their support : "We are in regular contact with people who know the family personally and approach the matter from this point of view."

Conviction

The problem with the growing number of fan clubs dedicated to Victoire Ingabire is that their enthusiasm includes the censoring of undesirable information. The message they wish to convey is that Ingabire stands for reconciliation, freedom and democracy in Rwanda. Not mentioned in the biographies they circulate is Ingabire's career within the RDR, a party founded in the Democratic Republic of the

Congo in 1995 by representatives of the former – genocidal – regime.

Ingabire joined the RDR in 1997 and became its president in 2000. Ingabire’s current party, FDU-Inkingi, is a coalition of the RDR and a few smaller parties and is in fact a continuation of the same party. The importance of this information becomes clear when we consider that the former military wing of the RDR still exists as the FDLR.

The FDLR is the most notorious guerrilla group in eastern Congo and was placed on the list of international terrorist organizations in 2005 by the United States. Independent evidence suggests that Victoire Ingabire has been in contact with, and provided support to, the FDLR. Suspicions against Victoire Ingabire and her party first emerged after experts of the UN Security Council in 2008 and 2009 conducted research into the international support network of the FDLR. The organization’s activities included illegal mining and logging.

Without help from abroad assisting with marketing and money laundering activities the organization could not survive. The research team discovered financial, logistical and political support from Rwandans in The Netherlands and Belgium, including (board)members of FDU-Inkingi, and a few charity organizations in the Balearic Islands who were in regular contact with Ingabire and her husband.

After her detention in Rwanda the Dutch police conducted house searches in the homes of Ingabire and an assistant in Bilthoven. These searches produced evidence of money transfers and other forms of contact. The evidence was confirmed by her Dutch lawyer.

Questionable views

Ingabire denied having met with FDLR leaders, but Kris Berwouts, one of the acquaintances who took to supporting her in the media, confirmed a meeting between Ingabire and FDLR commander General Aloys Ntwiragabo. In a Belgian magazine article Berwouts explains that the meeting was organized by Joseph Kabila, the president of Congo, who had supposedly suggested a non-violent pact between Ingabire and the FDLR to challenge Paul Kagame together. “She tried to convince them to lay down their arms,” Berwouts concludes.

Given the culture of extreme violence that is characteristic of the FDLR, which is after all their core business, Berwouts’ interpretation does not seem very realistic. But the opinions held by Dutch and Belgian supporters of Ingabire and the genocide suspects do not appear to be very well informed in general. They almost exclusively cite sketchy internet sources.

Google searches return an increasing number of websites that recycle the discourse of Ingabire’s party and the lawyers of genocide suspects. Wikipedia entries appear to be meddled with and need regular clean ups. Genuine studies and documents about the genocide are slowly drowned out by the misinformation that’s flooding the internet.

Unfortunately, that which is not readily available does not exist to the human mind. Considering the recent developments in international terrorism it is hard to imagine that in twenty years time there will be fan clubs defending the masterminds of the contemporary mass violence from Paris and Brussels to Lahore and beyond.

But then, who would have thought 22 years ago that it could ever happen in connection to the genocide of the Tutsi in Rwanda ?

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