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BURUNDI

JOURNALISTS SENTENCED TO IMPRISONMENT

On 30 January, the Bubanza Tribunal in northern Burundi sentenced journalists **Agnès Ndirubusa**, **Christine Kamikazi**, **Egide Harerimana** and **Térence Mpozenzi** to two years and six months in prison.

The initial charge of “conspiring to undermine state security” was changed during the sentencing to a charge of “impossible attempt to undermine state security”. The tribunal did not allow the journalists’ legal counsel to present counter arguments against this new charge. The tribunal acquitted their driver, Adolphe Masambarakiza. The four have appealed their sentence. Amnesty International believes the four are being persecuted simply for doing their legitimate work.

The four journalists were arrested with their driver, Adolphe Masambarakiza, on 22 October 2019, as they arrived in Bubanza province to investigate reports of clashes between security forces and an armed group. Adolphe Masambarakiza was released on bail on 20 November 2019, while the others remained in detention and was acquitted on 30 January 2020. The four journalists appealed the Bubanza Tribunal’s sentence on 21 February.

Amnesty International believes that Agnès Ndirubusa, Christine Kamikazi, Egide Harerimana and Térence Mpozenzi were prosecuted for doing their journalistic work and peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression. The activity for which they have been convicted – travelling to an area to investigate recent events – is precisely the kind of job journalists are expected to undertake.

Please send a letter to the Prosecutor General.

*Express dismay at the sentencing by the Bubanza Tribunal of Iwacu journalists Agnès Ndirubusa, Christine Kamikazi, Egide Harerimana and Térence Mpozenzi.

* Remind him that travel to investigate events is required if journalists are to properly do their jobs.

* Call on him to release the journalists without delay or conditions on their freedom, and to drop the charges against them.

Write to

Prosecutor General Sylvestre Nyandwi
Parquet général
B. P. 105
Bujumbura
Burundi

Salutation: Dear Prosecutor General

Please copy

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Additional information

Iwacu journalists Agnès Ndirubusa, Christine Kamikazi, Egide Harerimana, Térance Mpozenzi and their driver, Adolphe Masambarakiza were in Bubanza to investigate reports of clashes between the security forces and an armed group in the province. As is their usual practice, they had informed the provincial authorities of their plan to travel to the area, only to be arrested upon arrival.

On 31 October 2019, the Council Chamber of the Bubanza Tribunal decided to keep the five in detention at Bubanza Central Prison where they had been transferred from police cells by the provincial prosecutor's office five days earlier. They were charged with "undermining state security" the same day. In a statement, the Prosecutor General claimed that the five were not arrested for being journalists, but rather for the facts for which they were accused.

On 20 November, the Ntahangwa Court of Appeal confirmed the decision of the Bubanza Tribunal to keep the journalists in detention and decided to release the driver on bail.

Iwacu is one of the few independent news outlets still operating in Burundi. Since the crisis began in April 2015 over President Pierre Nkurunziza's bid for a third term in office, journalists, human rights defenders and opposition members have been targeted and many have been forced into exile. The move by President Nkurunziza sparked mass demonstrations as many believed it violated the [Arusha Accords](#) that ended a decade long civil war. The Accord prohibited anyone to preside over the country for more than 10 years. This ban was also reaffirmed in the 2005 Constitution. Demonstrations against President Nkurunziza's third term in 2015 were [violently dispersed](#) by security forces, resulting in scores of people arrested, injured, [tortured](#) and [killed](#). Many also went [missing](#).

On 13 and 14 May 2015, a group of senior military officers tried to overthrow President Nkurunziza's government. Four independent media outlets, Radio Publique Africaine, Radio Tele Renaissance and Radio Isanganiro were destroyed by security forces in the aftermath of the failed coup. They were accused of sympathizing with the coup plotters and to have broadcasted their messages.

Esdras Ndikumana, who worked as a correspondent for Radio France Internationale (RFI) and Agence France Presse, was arrested by the SNR on 2 August 2015 as he was taking photos at the scene where General Adolphe Nshimirimana was killed. He was tortured while in detention and released the same day.

Iwacu Founder and Director Antoine Kaburahe was also forced to leave the country after he was questioned by the Prosecutor's office in December 2015 over his alleged contacts with soldiers reportedly responsible for the failed coup of 13-14 May 2015.

[Jean Bigirimana](#), another Iwacu journalist, went missing on 22 July 2016 and his whereabouts remain unknown. According to his colleagues, Jean was lured to Bugarama for information on a case he was working on. He is believed to have been arrested by the National Intelligence Service (SNR) in Bugarama town, outside Bujumbura. His family have been forced into exile because of threats his wife received following her public statements on the enforced disappearance of her husband.