Désiré Ntahondabasigiye

Shot in front of his family

Désiré Ntahondabasigiye was a local representative of the opposition party Congrès national pour la liberté (CNL) in Nyabiraba commune, Bujumbura province. He was married with five children. His wife was expecting their sixth child when he was shot dead by members of the youth league of the ruling party, the Imbonerakure, on 12 December 2019, at his home in Musenyi colline (hill), Nyabiraba zone.

On the morning of 12 December, Désiré Havyarimana, the head of the ruling party – Conseil national pour la défense de la démocratie-Forces pour la défense de la démocratie (CNDD-FDD) – in Nyabiraba, told two local businessmen, also CNDD-FDD members, that Ntahondabasigiye was collecting financial contributions for the CNL and kept a record of these contributions in a notebook. To quash this rumour, Ntahondabasigiye gave one of the businessmen a notebook in which he recorded income from his and his wife’s business selling locally made beer, and asked him to show it to Havyarimana.

This did little to dampen the rumours. Later the same day, friends warned Ntahondabasigiye to be careful and told him he might be in danger.
That evening, between 7:30 and 8 pm, Ntahondabasigiye was eating dinner with his wife and children when several shots were fired through a window of his house. Ntahondabasigiye was fatally hit and died moments later. His wife and children were not hurt.

An eyewitness saw Jean Marie Ntagahoraho, an Imbonerakure who lived nearby, with a gun at the window just before the shots were fired, and a neighbour saw Mélance Ntakarutimana, another Imbonerakure, near the house, also holding a gun. Just before the attack, another neighbour had seen Jean Marie, Mélance and three other Imbonerakure – Shirira, Ndori and Didier – heading towards Ntahondabasigiye’s house. (Imbonerakure usually go by their first names or nicknames.) Local residents knew these Imbonerakure well.

The dramatic nature of the killing attracted media attention in Burundi and a large crowd attended the victim’s funeral. Yet six months on, those responsible for his murder are still free.

Mélance was arrested the day after the murder but was released two weeks later. A local resident said an Imbonerakure came in a vehicle to fetch him from the detention centre in Kabezi when he was released. He has not been re-arrested. An official in the prosecutor’s office began an investigation, but to date, no one else has been arrested in connection with the killing and the investigation appears to have been shelved. The Burundi Human Rights Initiative (BHRI) wrote to national government officials asking what action the authorities had taken following Ntahondabasigiye’s murder. BHRI also wrote to the prosecutor of Bujumbura province with additional questions about the alleged perpetrators. None of these officials replied.

In the days and weeks after Ntahondabasigiye’s death, three of the Imbonerakure seen near his house on the night of his murder – Mélance, Ndori and Didier – threatened members of his family and warned they would kill them if they continued following up the case.

Ntahondabasigiye had been threatened several times before in connection with his opposition activities. After taking part in public protests against President Pierre Nkurunziza’s decision to stand for a third term in 2015, he fled Burundi. Upon his return around two years later, he was arrested and imprisoned in Mpimba prison in Bujumbura; he was released in April 2019. Imbonerakure continued threatening him after his release.

About two months before his murder, Havyarimana threatened Ntahondabasigiye after he refused to make a financial contribution to the CNDD-FDD. Havyarimana, who was with the Imbonerakure called Shirira, said they had him within their grasp. A local resident recalled that he was with Ntahondabasigiye a few days before his death when Havyarimana walked past and said to Ntahondabasigiye: “I have you in my hand like an egg.”

The exact motive for his murder is not confirmed. However, local residents and other sources close to the case believe he was probably targeted because of his opposition activities and that Havyarimana may have played a role in ordering his murder. Havyarimana categorically denied these allegations. “These are lies,” he stated on 16 December 2019. “I hadn’t seen him (Ntahondabasigiye) for a whole week. The morning of
his murder, I was attending the registration of voters. I left home very early and came back at 4 pm. I never met this Désiré.”

Responding to allegations that the Imbonerakure Mélance, Jean Marie and Shirira may have been involved in the murder, Havyarimana replied: “I know Shirira... I was with him all day. At the time of the murder, I was with him... These are political agendas. They just want to get rid of the CNDD-FDD leaders. I haven’t seen Jean Marie for a long time... I don’t know the motives for this murder. I don’t even know where this Désiré lives. I’m sure Shirira doesn’t know him. Actually, initially I thought he had committed suicide. You have to look (for the answer) within his family.” He brushed aside allegations that he had threatened the victim on the morning of his death: “I have never been in contact with Désiré Ntahondabasigiye... We don’t talk to each other.”

Bujumbura province (formerly known as Bujumbura Rural) has long been a stronghold of the CNL. During Burundi’s armed conflict in the 1990s and 2000s, the Parti pour la libération du peuple hutu-Forces nationales de libération (PALIPEHUTU-FNL) – the armed group that later turned into a political party, the FNL, then changed its name to CNL in 2019 – used the area as its main base and carried out attacks on the city of Bujumbura. Even after the FNL demobilised and registered as a political party in 2009, the area continued to be the scene of political tensions and violence, with members of the security forces and Imbonerakure targeting members of the FNL and, more recently, the CNL. Since the current political crisis in Burundi erupted in 2015, local residents have regularly reported political tensions and killings in the province.

In the second half of February 2020, there were reported clashes between unidentified armed men and the police and military in Kanyosha and Nyabiraba communes. Many CNL members were arrested in the wake of these events, which some sources claimed had been staged by the authorities in order to blame them on the CNL and weaken their main rival before the elections. Some Imbonerakure participated in the staged attack, pretending to be combatants. Gruesome images of some of the alleged combatants who were killed circulated on social media.

A few weeks later, on 16 March, Méthuselah Nahishakiye, head of the CNL on Migera hill, Kabezi commune, was shot dead at around 8 pm, close to his parents’ house where he was staying. He had multiple gunshot wounds on his legs, arms, stomach, chest and face. The identity of the perpetrators is not known.

In the previous weeks, Nahishakiye, around 25 years old, had fled his home after being threatened by local Imbonerakure and other CNDD-FDD members who were reportedly unhappy with his activities to mobilise people to join the CNL. A friend said that on the day of his burial, Imbonerakure on motorcycles followed the funeral procession and cut through it, chanting threatening slogans.

Twelve people, most of them CNL members, were arrested and questioned after the murder. Eight were released on 19 March and four were transferred to Mpimba prison in Bujumbura. These arrests are typical of a pattern in the aftermath of human rights violations against CNL members: the authorities commonly arrest other CNL members, often on spurious grounds, while CNDD-FDD members named by witnesses as the alleged perpetrators escape justice.
In May, a CNDD-FDD member said that a judicial police officer had given a local government official blank arrest warrants to fill in with the names of CNL members in his area. Dozens of CNL members were arrested in Bujumbura province in the pre-election period, many of them arbitrarily, as the government sought to obstruct the CNL’s activities before the polls.

For further information about the series, read “The Deadly Price of Opposition”.

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