Opposition party member, mother of 10, beaten to death by ruling party youth

When members of the youth league of the ruling party, the Imbonerakure, targeted Fauzia Basesuwabo’s husband and sons because they were opposition party members, she tried to escape. Imbonerakure caught her and beat her mercilessly. The following account details the brutality of the Imbonerakure that led to her death.

Two members of the opposition party Congrès national pour la liberté (CNL) were minding their own business, walking down the road in Muyinga province on 26 February 2020 when Aloys Niyoyita, alias Gihori, passed by on a motorcycle. The driver slammed on the brakes and Gihori unleashed a tirade of insults, calling them “CNL dogs”, accusing them of holding an illegal meeting, and saying he and his fellow Imbonerakure were going to start shooting CNL members.

A heated discussion and a skirmish ensued, in which one of the CNL members hit Gihori with a piece of wood, opening a gash on his head. The two CNL members then fled the scene.
It’s unclear what provoked Gihori to insult them, but the day before, during a public meeting in Jani hill, an influential member of the Imbonerakure told the crowd: “We should chase after (CNL members) until their feet burn. Even those under their mosquito nets will be caught and destroyed.” He said that anywhere people see a member of the CNL, they should tie them up and that the CNL should be hated and banished from public places like bars and markets. Such threats would soon be put into action in Jani.

This kind of rhetoric, which was prevalent long before the May 2020 elections, has had devastating consequences. In remote areas, threats and violence are a part of daily life and the facts surrounding them often remain hidden in the hills. Local authorities – some of whom may be involved in abuses or fear the ruling party, the CNDD-FDD – know the power of the Imbonerakure and when to defer to them.

Muyinga province is no exception. On 3 April 2020 in Giteranyi commune, for example, Imbonerakure beat a CNL member, looted his house and stole 200,000 Burundian francs (approximately US$105). When judicial police officers finally interviewed the victim four days later, they didn’t seem interested in the facts of the case. The Imbonerakure who beat the victim most harshly was seen a few days later drinking beer with local policemen. The victim contacted the prosecutor in Muyinga and judicial officials struck a deal with the Imbonerakure: they would compensate the victim, but wouldn’t be punished. At the time of writing, they had largely done so, but no other action was taken against them for beating him.

In Giteranyi commune in January 2020, Imbonerakure burned down the house of a woman who had become tired of their frequent demands for financial contributions. In December 2019, Imbonerakure detained a 35-year-old CNL member because, they said: “He was an idiot and they wanted to educate him.” His wife hasn’t seen him since.

The February clash in Jani between Gihori and the CNL members evolved into one of the most brutal attacks in Muyinga in months. It offers a glimpse into how quickly Imbonerakure can marshal fellow members, incite them to violence and collectively focus their rage on a single family.

Angry and bleeding from the head after the fight with the two CNL members, Gihori called local Imbonerakure on the telephone to hunt down members of the CNL in the area. Word quickly spread, and a large group of Imbonerakure converged on the house of Selemani Rwasa, a CNL member who lived in Jani and whose son was involved in the fight with Gihori.

Other Imbonerakure went to the nearby home of Sosthène Murasandonyi, alias Gahindira, the CNL representative of the same hill, who had locked himself in his house for protection. A witness said Murasandonyi believed Imbonerakure were going to kill him, so he armed himself with a small hoe and attempted to repel the Imbonerakure who had started destroying his house to reach him.

Gihori arrived at Selemani Rwasa’s house followed by a large group of Imbonerakure from Jani and neighboring hills chanting: “Hit them! Hit them!” Gihori was armed with a machete and a small hoe. Initially, Rwasa and his sons attempted to defend themselves with whatever objects they could find. Gihori grabbed a piece of firewood and fought with Rwasa who had a machete that he’d been using for farm work.
Witnesses said they heard Gihori warn that he was going to take revenge for the earlier incident by “killing at least three people” from Rwasa’s family. Other *Imbonerakure* said they were going to beat them until they were incapable of harvesting the beans they had planted.

When a large group of *Imbonerakure* led by the *chef de colline* (local official) of Jani, Joseph Ndayizeye, arrived, Rwasa and his three sons surrendered, and his sons were tied up. A witness said that Ndayizeye carried a large stick and a spear.

In the chaos, Fauzia Basesuwabo, 54, Rwasa’s wife, fled on foot to a nearby valley. She later told a local resident that *Imbonerakure* caught her. Some of them wanted to let her go, but two of them, Jean Nshimirimana alias Nzabampema and Innocent Cinyeretse, refused. Nzabampema told her: “Even if the others let you go, I’m going to deal with you until you die.” They beat her hard with clubs on the kidneys, the ribs and on the chest. After the beating, Nzabampema escorted Basesuwabo to her house.

An eyewitness described the scene that was unfolding at Rwasa’s house: “(*Imbonerakure*) had clubs (and) electric cables that they used as whips; they had ropes (like those) used to tie baggage on bicycles. (One of them) had a spear while Iddy (Niyonzima), the CNDD-FDD representative in Jani, had a board studded with nails. One person in the group had an axe.”

Some of the *Imbonerakure*, along with Ndayizeye, beat Rwasa and his three sons. Ndayizeye stopped beating them when he received a phone call. It’s not known who called him, but when he hung up, he announced that police were coming and told *Imbonerakure*: “If you want me to stay as *chef de colline*, don’t target their heads.”

Two policemen arrived on a motorcycle and ordered the men’s hands to be untied. They left with two *Imbonerakure*, Ndunguye and Saduni Gahungu, and two CNL members, Sosthène Murasandonyi and a local businessman named Jean Claude, and then sent them to the police detention centre in Muyinga.

According to a source with first-hand local knowledge, Jean Claude had been involved in a business dispute with Gihori – a possible reason for his arrest.

Basesuwabo had arrived home after her beating, just before the police came. As she wasn’t bleeding or showing any visible wounds, the two policemen decided she didn’t need to be taken to the health centre. They ordered motorcycle drivers to take Rwasa and his three sons, who were seriously wounded, to the health centre. At around 9 pm, an ambulance transferred them from the health centre to the district hospital.

Basesuwabo attempted to walk the 3 kilometres to the health centre that evening, but she was in too much pain to walk the distance – or return home – so she curled up in a banana grove and spent the night there. The next day, a relative helped her walk to the health centre where she was given a few pills.

On 29 February, the administrator of Gasorwe commune, Jean Claude Barutwanayo, held a meeting in Jani to pacify local residents. A person who attended the meeting said the administrator thanked the *Imbonerakure* for their work, which residents took to mean the attack on Rwasa and his family. He exhorted the *Imbonerakure* to continue to work without fear or hesitation.
Meanwhile, Basesuwabo’s condition was deteriorating. By 2 March, she had returned to the health centre where she spent the night but was given no specialised care. She returned home and her condition deteriorated further. She died on 4 March. According to a relative, “she had no problems with any family members or neighbours. She loved the (CNL) party.”

After her death, the chef de colline, Joseph Ndayizeye, went to the health centre and attempted to persuade the health worker who treated Basesuwabo to attribute her death to malaria. The health worker allegedly refused. In a public meeting, Ndayizeye warned residents of Jani that if anyone said Basesuwabo had been beaten to death, they would be “physically eliminated”. He told everyone to say she died of malaria.

About two weeks after the attack, police released the two Imbonerakure from detention. Cyprien Sinzotuma, the CNDD-FDD provincial secretary, gave each of them 25 kilograms of rice. Sinzotuma has used violent language when talking about opponents in the past. In 2018, according to media accounts, he told Imbonerakure they would “cut up the enemies of Burundi for the raptors” and they should “castrate” them.

A few days later, at a public meeting, Jean Claude Barutwanayo thanked the Imbonerakure Ndunguye while referring to the attacks against Rwasa and Murasandonyi. According to a person present at the meeting, he called Ndunguye a hero who had led and won a “praiseworthy fight”. The administrator encouraged him to continue working in the same way.

Rwasa and other victims of the attack went to see the governor of Muyinga province on 6 March, but she wasn’t available. Instead, her advisor met them, along with Barutwanayo. According to a person with knowledge of the meeting, Barutwanayo told the CNL members to either return to their homes or flee to Rwanda or Tanzania – Muyinga province borders both countries. Three days later, Barutwanayo organised a meeting between Rwasa, Gihori and Ndayizeye, the chef de colline. Barutwanayo, who had apparently discussed the case with senior officials, told Rwasa he could return to Jani and he assured his safety. He also said that he should cut off contact with the CNL and join the CNDD-FDD.

The Burundi Human Rights Initiative (BHRI) wrote to national government officials asking what action the authorities had taken on Basesuwabo’s death. BHRI also wrote to the governor and prosecutor of Muyinga province with additional questions about the alleged perpetrators. None of these officials replied. BHRI phoned Joseph Ndayizeye, the chef de colline of Jani, to ask for his response. He said he would not comment on human rights issues and told BHRI to call the commune (the local government office).

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

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www.twitter.com/@BHRI_IDHB
contact@burundihri.org
+1 267 896 3399 (WhatsApp)