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Rwandan Priest Sentenced to 15 Years for Allowing Deaths of Tutsi in Church

By Marc Lacey

An international war crimes court yesterday sentenced a Roman Catholic priest to 15 years in prison for ordering his church in western Rwanda demolished by bulldozers in 1994 while 2,000 ethnic Tutsi sought refuge there from the mass killing breaking out all around.

The Rev. Athanase Seromba, a Hutu convicted of genocide and crimes against humanity, was the first Roman Catholic priest to be tried before the International Criminal Tribunal based in Arusha, Tanzania, officials said.

At least two other Catholic priests await charges in Arusha, according to news service reports, while three Catholic nuns and a handful of clergy members from other denominations have already been convicted in various courts for their roles in the killing, which led to an estimated 800,000 deaths.

The mass killing began in April 1994 when Hutu extremists mobilized the majority population in the tiny central African country to root out and kill Tutsi and moderate Hutu.

Some of the most gruesome attacks in what is an overwhelmingly Roman Catholic country took place in churches and missions, where members of the clergy committed acts of heroism but also of shame.

The brutality is still visible in Rwanda today as some churches have been left as memorials, with the human remains of victims piled up among the pews.

The Vatican has suggested in the past that it is unfairly being made a target over the killings in Rwanda. "The Holy See cannot but express a certain surprise at seeing the grave responsibility of so many people and groups involved in this tremendous genocide had been heaped on so few people," a Vatican spokesman said in a statement in 2001, after two Catholic nuns were convicted in Belgium.

The Tutsi hiding at Father Seromba's church on April 12, 1994, in Nyange, a village in western Rwanda, managed to repel the first attackers, according to testimony. But members of the so-called Interahamwe militia, joined by Rwandan soldiers, threw grenades at the church and secured the assistance of Father Seromba.

He identified the weakest parts of his church as targets for the bulldozer drivers, a panel of judges found. He also later encouraged the fighters who charged the church to finish off any survivors, to whom he referred as cockroaches, according to testimony.

After the massacre, Father Seromba fled Rwanda, changed his name to Anastasio Sumba Bura and worked as a priest in two parishes near Florence, Italy. He surrendered to the tribunal on Feb. 6, 2002, and pleaded not guilty to the charges against him.

During his trial, prosecutors called 15 witnesses, including survivors of the attack who put Father Seromba at the scene. His defense attorneys, Patrice Monte and Barnabe Nekuie, both of Cameroon, called 24 witnesses to buttress his reputation as a well-regarded religious man, before closing their case in April.

Since the tribunal, backed by the United Nations, began work in 1997, it has convicted 27 people and acquitted 5. The court, which has been criticized at times for its slow pace, was meant to supplement Rwanda's own justice system by focusing on prominent figures, including politicians, journalists and members of the clergy.

Last week, Elizaphan Ntakirutimana, who had been a Seventh-day Adventist pastor, was released by the tribunal after serving a 10-year sentence for his role in the killings. He was accused of standing by in western Rwanda as his parishioners were killed.

The judges said the 15-year sentence for Father Seromba reflected aggravating factors such as his authority as a Catholic priest and the trust he had from those seeking shelter in his parish. His sentence will be reduced by the four years he has already served, the judges said.

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