

Genocide suspect in the dock

Agence France-Presse
24 October 2005

ARUSHA, Tanzania, Oct 24 (AFP) - A man accused of planning Rwanda's 1994 genocide took the stand in his own defense before a United Nations-backed tribunal here on Monday in long-awaited testimony in one of the court's most critical trials.

Colonel Theoneste Bagosora, the cabinet director of Rwanda's defense ministry when the genocide began, opened what is expected to be a two-week appearance before the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), officials said.

He and three fellow senior army officers are charged with genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and conspiracy to commit genocide.

All four have pleaded not guilty to charges that they played key roles in the deaths of some 800,000 mainly minority Tutsis and political moderate Hutus slain by Hutu extremists during the 100-day killing spree.

Bagosora's lawyer, French attorney Raphael Constant, has questioned the very basis for the case against his client, arguing that prosecutors have failed to prove the killings meet the legal definition of "genocide".

Slow-moving trial

Constant has said his examination of the 64-year-old defendant will cover a wide range of issues including his military career, relations with Rwanda's late president Juvenal Habyarimana, whose assassination triggered the killings, as well as the events from April to July 1994 when the massacres took place.

In addition to Bagosora, Constant has said he intends to call former United Nations envoy to Rwanda, Jacques Roger Booh-Booh and several current Rwandan officials, including defence minister Marcel Gatsinzi, as witnesses.

Bagosora is jointly accused with lieutenant-colonel Anatole Nsegiyumva, the former commander of Gisenyi military region, brigadier Gratien Kabiligi, the former chief of military operations, and major Alloys Ntabakuze, the former commander of the Para-commando battalion of Kanombe (Kigali).

The slow-moving trial, known as legal circles as "Military I", began in April 2002, and resumed earlier this month after a four-month hiatus. It is expected to run until December 14, court officials have said.

The Arusha-based ICTR was set up set up in 1994 and began work three years later trying key suspects in the genocide. It has thus far convicted 22 suspects and acquitted three.