

Rwanda to Release 30,000 Genocide Participants

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KIGALI, Rwanda -- Rwanda plans to release at least 30,000 suspects who have confessed to participating in the 1994 genocide, letting them be tried in community courts rather than by the country's overburdened judicial system, an official said Saturday.

The suspects will be released by the end of June -- cutting by a third the 90,000 suspects being held on charges of taking part in the slaughter of at least 500,000 people, mostly minority Tutsis, said Johnston Busingye, the secretary general of the justice ministry. The genocide was orchestrated by a government of extremists from Rwanda's Hutu majority.

The planned release is the second of its kind in Rwanda. Last May, some 23,000 suspects were released after confessing they took part in the genocide. The announcement of the second release came just weeks before the 10th anniversary of the start of the genocide on April 7, 1994.

Like those scheduled to be released in June, the first group promised to lead exemplary lives while awaiting to be tried by their neighbors in traditional community courts known as "gacaca." The maximum sentence that can be imposed by a gacaca is life in prison.

The release is intended to ease overcrowding in Rwanda's prisons and the resulting strain on government coffers -- Rwanda spends about \$2.6 million feeding the suspects each month.

Leaders of the genocide are not eligible to be released.

Busingye said another group of prisoners will likely be released next year. To qualify, prisoners must detail their roles in the genocide and name others involved in slaughter.

Meanwhile, in Belgium, a leading suspect in the killing of 10 Belgian peacekeepers during the genocide has handed himself over to Belgian authorities, the Belgian Foreign Ministry said Saturday.

Bernard Ntuyahaga had been freed on Friday by a Tanzanian court that turned down an extradition request from Rwanda. "He decided to put himself at the disposal of Belgian prosecutors," foreign ministry spokesman Patrick Herman said.

Ntuyahaga flew to Brussels accompanied by Belgian officials and faced immediate questioning by an investigating magistrate.

A major in the former Rwandan army, Ntuyahaga commanded a base in the capital Kigali where the Belgian paratroopers on U.N. duty were attacked and killed by a larger Rwandan force.

Their deaths prompted the United Nations to withdraw its troops during the genocide.

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