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Notorious Pastor Convicted By UN Tribunal Completes Jail Term

An elderly former pastor today became the first person convicted and jailed by the United Nations war crimes tribunal for the Rwandan genocide to be released after serving his sentence.

Elizaphan Ntakirutimana, 81, a former senior pastor of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, was sentenced by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) in February 2003 to 10 years' imprisonment after being convicted of aiding and abetting the 1994 genocide in the central African country. He was also convicted of aiding and abetting extermination.

Mr. Ntakirutimana was given credit for the time spent in detention before his trial. He was arrested in the United States in September 1996, later released and re-arrested, before being transferred to the ICTR detention centre in Arusha, Tanzania, in March 2000.

At his trial, prosecutors told the ICTR how Mr. Ntakirutimana personally drove armed Hutu attackers to various places where Tutsis had taken refuge and also went to a church in the Bisesero area of western Rwanda in which he was pastor and ordered the removal of its roof so that Tutsis could no longer use it as a shelter.

Several witnesses testified that they believed Mr. Ntakirutimana would use his influence to protect them from attacks, and in April 1994 seven Tutsi pastors wrote a letter to him pleading for his intervention.

"We wish to inform you that we have heard that tomorrow we will be killed with our families," the letter stated. But in his reply the pastor wrote "there is nothing I can do for you. All you can do is prepare to die, for your time has come."

His son, Gerard, a medical doctor, was sentenced by the Tribunal to 25 years' jail for related war crimes.

Some 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were murdered, mostly by machete, across Rwanda in just 100 days starting in April 1994. The Security Council set up the ICTR in November that year to prosecute people responsible for genocide and other serious violations of international humanitarian law.