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## Interview: Perpetue Nshimirimana-Gashaza

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# Burundi's battle for freedom and the dignity of its people

*Madame Nshimirimana-Gashaza was Burundi's ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva during 1993-95. This interview, conducted by Uwe Friesecke, was translated from the French.*

**EIR:** Madame Nshimirimana-Gashaza, how did you become ambassador, and for how long did you serve in this function?

**Nshimirimana-Gashaza:** After the June 1993 elections, the President-elect, Melchior Ndadaye, named me to the new crew of ambassadors who were to represent Burundi in friendly countries. I was the second Burundian woman to attain the rank of ambassador, and I was assigned to Geneva as Burundi's Permanent Representative to the United Nations and other international organizations.

I presented my credentials on Oct. 20, 1993, and that very evening, in Bujumbura, the Army carried out a coup d'état against President Ndadaye. So my career began with one of the most acute crises in Burundi's history. I held that position until January 1995, when I officially notified the UN that my functions were ended.

**EIR:** Burundi's government in power has set up so-called regroupment camps since the end of 1996. Some say they are concentration camps. The Buyoya government claims that they serve the security of the civilian population. How would you characterize them, and what is the situation of the civilian population in Burundi today?

**Nshimirimana-Gashaza:** These forced regroupment camps can in no way guarantee the security of the populations concentrated there. On the contrary, these citizens were forcibly rounded up because the Buyoya government wanted to cut them off from the FDD [Force for the Defense of Democracy, the armed wing of the opposition], since they offered a recruitment base for the Burundian rebellion.

On a strictly humanitarian level, these camps are a catastrophe for the civil population:

- Many have died from diseases related to malnutrition and to poor hygienic conditions. Diarrheal diseases, typhus, cholera, skin diseases, etc., have taken a tremendous human toll.

- Morally, these people have also been affected. The fact that they were obliged to leave their natural environment to live far away from home, in make-shift shelters, has dealt a terrible blow to their dignity as human beings.

The forced regroupment camps cover this government with shame. It does not shy away from paradoxes: How can you claim to be taking care of a people's safety and, at the same time, let them die and humiliate them in this way?

**EIR:** Are only Hutus forced into these camps? And what do you think the Buyoya government intends to accomplish with them?

**Nshimirimana-Gashaza:** There are not only Hutus in these camps, even if the overwhelming majority of them are. Tutsis are put into what are called "displaced persons camps." Although they are under the protection of "law enforcement forces," and have some advantages over their Hutu colleagues in the regroupment camps, still their living conditions, on the humanitarian level, are just as disastrous. That is why it is hard to understand the solidarity of these displaced persons toward the de facto authorities in Bujumbura, who have deprived them of everything. It seems to me that people in the forced regroupment camps and in the displaced persons camps should join together, to denounce and cry out against what the putschist government in Bujumbura is doing.

**EIR:** You were appointed by the late President Melchior Ndadaye, whom you knew personally. What did his electoral victory in the summer of 1993 mean for you? And what do you think its importance was for Burundi?

**Nshimirimana-Gashaza:** With the June '93 elections, a page of Burundian history was turned, and a new one began. These elections put an end to 27 years of military dictatorship and of undivided rule by a small minority of the population. Finally, those who had been so long oppressed were going to have their say. They hoped to enjoy all their rights, freely. They were going to undertake projects unharassed, and to really take part in the country's development, which had been denied them for three decades. Because without peace, development is not possible. The June 1993 elections were like a liberation for an entire people.

**EIR:** How does Ndadaye compare to the other Presidents of Burundi since independence? What was his vision of Burundi for the future?

**Nshimirimana-Gashaza:** In the first four years after independence, Burundi remained a kingdom. The Burundians did not question things so much then, convinced as they were that the King ruled by divine law. Since 1966, with successive military regimes stemming from a coup d'état, and imposed upon the population, things went from bad to worse. Hutu-Tutsi ethnic differences were exacerbated for three decades, leading to repeated massacres. Compared to his predecessors, Ndadaye was a liberator, recognized as such by a large majority of Burundians, simply because he was the President they had chosen.

Our country being riddled with ethnic divisions, Ndadaye promised to concentrate great effort on this question, to make Burundi into a united country, where everyone could live peacefully. Peace among the citizens is a precondition for carrying out any kind of project, as Ndadaye had understood from the start.

**EIR:** Do you judge him so positively because he was a Hutu?

**Nshimirimana-Gashaza:** No, it is not because he was a Hutu that I appreciated him. The very fact that he had been elected by popular vote, by the Burundian people, meant he was reassuring. It was the first time in our history that the people had elected their President, and it was wonderful. Having myself been a member of the electoral commission set up in March 1993, I can certify that the elections were the most free and democratic that have ever been held in Burundi. Ndadaye personified confidence for us.

**EIR:** Why do you think Ndadaye was assassinated?

**Nshimirimana-Gashaza:** President Ndadaye was assassinated because he had taken his political adversaries by surprise. In a few months' time, he proved that he was able to propose real projects for our society, contrary to what the three military dictatorships before then had done:

- Economically, the country was better off;
- There was a perceptible cohesion between the President and his constituency;
- Ndadaye was going to allow another layer of the population to emerge on the political and economic scene, and that was intolerable for his adversaries. They could not accept losing their monopoly over all sectors of the nation;
- If the democratic regime were consolidated, those who had been involved in the massacres of 1965, 1972, 1988, etc., feared that they would end up some day in court and forced to answer for their acts, and they were definitely not willing to face that. So, it was necessary to end the democratic process and to let the situation rot. That was accomplished through Ndadaye's assassination.

**EIR:** Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the West has

been campaigning for democracy in Africa. Did any Western government or the United Nations help defend President Ndadaye, after he was elected in June 1993? And what happened after his assassination? What reactions did you get at the UN and from the American and European governments?

**Nshimirimana-Gashaza:** Once the elections results were officially announced, the Army declared that they agreed with the people's choice, which was a way of stating their loyalty to the new authorities. The situation was sensitive. Everybody knew the Army was mono-ethnic. Ndadaye had promised to try to solve this thorny problem during his term in office. If he had called upon foreign troops to ensure his defense, right after coming to power, he would have been accused of being divisive. So, he had to show confidence in the Army, even though it was very risky to do so.

After his assassination, the attitude of Western powers toward Burundi was simply incomprehensible. All Western governments had condemned the putsch: France, Germany, the United States, Belgium, the European Community. . . . Being the main financiers of Burundi, they announced that they "were suspending aid and threatening to cut it off immediately and totally, if democracy were not quickly restored and President Ndadaye given back his constitutional rights." The UN Security Council also denounced the putsch. But it was when Burundi requested the presence of a foreign force to protect its legal institutions, that the Western attitude was astounding. The help Burundi requested was limited. We were asking for 800 men to be sent to protect, among others: the President of the Republic; the members of government; the National Assembly [parliament]; the National Radio and Television; the Bank of the Republic (national bank).

To this call, no government answered. The UN claimed to be engaged on several fronts already, and unable to intervene in Burundi. And yet, all these countries had demanded that the African countries democratize, in order to continue receiving aid. Burundi was a model of democratization. When this democracy was imperilled, no one was willing to intervene to save it.

Today, in 1997, when the human and material damage incurred since this assassination is measured against the small, yet sufficient amount of aid Burundi was requesting, in order to avoid a disaster, it makes Burundians have a very bitter feeling toward the international community.

**EIR:** Burundi's President in power, Buyoya, has been credited by some with setting the country on the path of democratic elections once before, and therefore he might do it again. Do you agree with this assessment, or how do you judge Buyoya's government?

**Nshimirimana-Gashaza:** Looking back several years later, it is obvious that Buyoya was forced to accept the democratic process, because of the international political context at the time; but personally, he never believed in it. How could you otherwise explain why he came back and imposed himself,

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through a coup d'état, on a population that had sweepingly rejected him? I very much doubt that he would wish to repeat the experience of 1993, since he knows beforehand that he would lose if elections were properly organized. The lack of symbiosis between him and the Burundian people is striking. Since he made his putsch on July 25, 1996, he has been unable to keep any of the promises made in his first speeches. Peace is still far away. Thousands of people have died. The Burundian economy, already bled dry, has only gotten worse.

The present government is foundering and has no precise, viable program for the country. What can we expect from such a situation? Nothing positive.

**EIR:** How do you see the Hutu-Tutsi conflict in Burundi? Is it political? Is it a serious ethnic conflict?

**Nshimirimana-Gashaza:** Originally, the Hutu-Tutsi conflict was not ethnic. Those who wanted to seize and to keep power, at any cost, used ethnic groups, to gain sympathy among them and to crush the others. But the conflict shifted slowly from a politico-economical one, to an ethnic one. It is a sore subject that the ruling powers have exploited for these last three decades. Today, we are faced with polarization of Burundian society, which is only seen as a Hutu-Tutsi problem.

**EIR:** What went wrong after independence, that the conflict repeatedly erupted with such violence?

**Nshimirimana-Gashaza:** Wrong political management after independence contributed a great deal to the disastrous course of events. The Hima clan (to which Michel Micombero, the first President of the Republic, belonged), which had previously been excluded from public affairs, wanted to take revenge, destroying everything in its path that might slow its rise to power. The Hutus, who make up 85% of the population, were considered a permanent threat, and they became the victims of the Himas' megalomaniacal vision. This led to the tragedies of 1965, 1972, 1988, 1991, and 1993. On each occasion, the military dictatorships bloodily crushed thousands of Hutus, in a desperate attempt to put an end to this "threat."

**EIR:** What were the reasons for the genocide of April 1972?

**Nshimirimana-Gashaza:** What happened in 1972 was the logical follow-up to 1965. Although many intellectuals had already been assassinated, there were still some left in almost

all sectors of national life, including in the Army. To establish undivided rule, the dictatorial regime of Micombero set about to eliminate all Hutus, in all walks of life.

To justify the genocide of 1972, the backers of the different military regimes often invoke the repression of a Hutu rebellion, but to me, this makes no sense. At the time, there were no Burundians living abroad. Where would this rebellion have started?

**EIR:** How do you remember those events?

**Nshimirimana-Gashaza:** In 1972, I was very young. In most Hutu families, the ethnic question was a taboo, including in my home. This was not the case in Tutsi families. I could see that atrocities were being committed around me, but I received no explanation for them. The men in my neighborhood were disappearing, one after the other. My school friends had all lost their fathers. We accepted that we were all becoming fatherless, at the same time, without knowing or understanding why that was the case. It took a long time, before I started getting an answer to the question.

**EIR:** Is there something like a "Hutu trauma" from this time?

**Nshimirimana-Gashaza:** There was a very real trauma among Hutus. They would be decimated in cycles, beginning with the intellectuals. No one dared to say anything. The Hutus lived in hiding, as if each one were afraid to be noticed and to become the next target for the killers. It was not until 1993 that they recovered their dignity.

**EIR:** But some Tutsis say, they have a trauma from Hutu violence against them!

**Nshimirimana-Gashaza:** The Tutsis know how cruel they have been to the Hutus. They fear that were a Hutu to take power, he would apply a revanchist policy. But, the first measures taken by President Ndadaye were an attempt at appeasement and reconciliation. By naming a Tutsi prime minister from the Uprona, the main opposition party, he made a gesture toward reassuring his opponents. He did not have to do so, given the election results. There were many Tutsi opposition people in his government, which was also reassuring.

**EIR:** After all this, and your experience since 1993, do you still have hope, that one day the conflict in Burundi can be solved peacefully? What would be the preconditions for that?

**Nshimirimana-Gashaza:** A peaceful solution is always possible, if the will is there on both sides.

For three years now, the “Burundian Army” has engaged a rebellion against democracy. The people have organized themselves to fight, and, today, weapons do not belong exclusively to one group. It is only through sincere negotiations among the actors that peace will be restored. I insist on the word *sincerity*, because that is what is so often lacking. If these negotiations should lead to a compromise, such as that of the 1994 Government Convention, which was violated by those who had initiated it, and which was impossible to respect, then it would be useless to go on.

Burundi belongs to everyone: Hutus, Tutsis, and Twas. There is a place for everyone, all being respected, and that is the necessary precondition for overcoming the crisis and advancing along the right path. The people voted in 1993. Return to constitutional legality is imperative. The rest will follow. Any solution that avoids this reality is bound to fail.

**EIR:** Are there forces in Burundi today, who are seriously working for a peaceful solution? Can existing political parties in Burundi and the Parliament play a role?

**Nshimirimana-Gashaza:** Unfortunately, if there are any, which I doubt, we have seen no sign of a positive result. The hardliners in the Army, the Uprona, and its satellites maintain their positions firmly. We see no serious effort for a positive trend. Officially, Uprona President Charles Mukasi refuses to come to the negotiating table, while Buyoya agrees to, but poses unacceptable conditions. It seems very difficult to reconcile these positions. People of good will are marginalized by forces of evil.

Officially, political parties have not existed since the July 25, 1996 putsch, and they cannot engage in activity. As for the Parliament, most of whose members have died or are living in exile, maneuvering room is limited, but it is nonetheless the only remaining legal institution in the country.

**EIR:** But what are their chances to succeed, since the “friends” of Buyoya and former dictator Bagaza seem to have unlimited power in Uganda, Rwanda, and now also in Congo?

**Nshimirimana-Gashaza:** It is true that the nondemocratic changes taking place in our sub-region since 1993 have not made it any easier for Burundian democrats. When war broke out in Zaire last year, the putschists in Burundi were hoping the [Burundian] rebellion would be crushed in the same operation. On the contrary, rebel activities have strongly increased, and the situation is not as simple as Bujumbura would have us believe.

For the moment, Rwanda has its own internal problems, Congo-Zaire and Uganda as well. Blocking peace in Burundi only extends the conflict zone in this part of Africa.

**EIR:** How significant were events in Burundi for the political

developments in your neighboring country Rwanda? For example, how did the assassination of President Ndadaye affect the situation there? Did this play a role in the tragic events in Rwanda in 1994?

**Nshimirimana-Gashaza:** The assassination of President Ndadaye was the beginning of a conflict that was to spread throughout all the Great Lakes Region, and may go even further, if nothing is done to stop it. Over 700,000 Burundian refugees wound up in Rwanda, which had been at war since 1990, and where a great deal of the population was already displaced.

Consolidation of a democratic regime in Burundi would have fostered the same process in neighboring countries. That was frightening to those who had caused the war in Rwanda: They would have lost out. So, they wanted to prevent Burundi from becoming stabilized. If Rwanda were to help Burundi, the situation would be to the detriment of the Rwandan rebellion, which refused free and democratic elections. So, the Kigali regime [in Rwanda] had to be destabilized as well. The Rwandans, in their turn, became refugees by the thousands in neighboring countries, especially Zaire.

**EIR:** Recently the Kabila regime in Congo sabotaged a UN team of investigators and did not allow them to investigate the evidence of mass killings of refugees by Kabila’s forces, during their march to Kinshasa at the beginning of the year. From your experience with the UN, why does the secretary general tolerate this and not apply whatever sanctions are necessary to have the investigators do their work?

**Nshimirimana-Gashaza:** It is hard to explain how the UN can look the other way when such serious human rights violations are committed. Personally, I do not despair, and I believe that some day the truth will be known about the tragic events in eastern Zaire, so that those who are responsible will stand trial and answer for their acts.

**EIR:** What do you think the U.S. government of President Clinton should do to really promote peace and stability in your region in Africa and in your country, Burundi?

**Nshimirimana-Gashaza:** Being the world’s leading power, the United States could bring all its force to bear, and obtain peace in the Great Lakes Region in general, and in Burundi, in particular. For that, they must understand the problems in each country. They are among the oldest democracies. In our region, regimes seeking to impose themselves without popular consent upon the governed, will find it increasingly difficult to be accepted, and Burundi is a good example of that. The people want to have their say in the choice of their leaders. That is very important. This truth holds for the West, just as much as in Africa, and the United States should act from that standpoint. It is only in that way, that their their own interests will be better served in Africa.

The internal situation in each country, as is, tends to indicate that the conflicts will go on for several more years.