

Bishops' Role in the Great Crisis in Burundi
Most Reverend Evariste Ngoyagoye
Archbishop of Bujumbura
President, Conference of Catholic Bishops of Burundi

Burundi has experienced political chaos that have resulted in crises in 1965, 1972, 1988 and from 1993 to present. My presentation will focus particularly on the period from 1993 to present.

Important Facts

On the night of October 20, 1993 a military group attacked the presidential palace, kidnapped the newly elected President, Melchior Ndadaye, and murdered him. Several of his close collaborators were also killed as a result of this push. Several government officials, particularly those belonging to the president's political party, found refuge in embassies and elsewhere. This situation led to a deadlock: there was no functioning government, which in turn led to anarchy.

In the meantime, the military proclaimed on the public radio that there was a new president. The newly self-proclaimed president made a statement on the radio and declared a state of emergency for the entire country. While all of this was taking place in Burundi, a government in exile is proclaimed from neighboring Rwanda by a member of the legal government.

While this situation is creating confusion in the country, violence erupted throughout the national territory specifically targeting members of the Tutsi ethnic group and members of political opposition parties. At the same time, the repression of the armed forces is engaged and hits this time mainly members of the Hutu ethnic group. The violence was uncontrollable, and both Tutsi and Hutu were incapable of ending it.

The massive and discriminatory mass killing aroused feelings of ethnocentrism, which resulted in the radicalization of ethnic belonging and the deepening of the ethnic divide between Tutsi and Hutu. As result, all Burundians, a total of 6 million people, were classified against their will along lines of ethnic identity. This led to the phenomenon of "ethnic purification" in several districts and regions throughout the nation. As result, several thousand Burundians were internally displaced for some and refugees in neighboring countries such as Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo for others.

In the face of the massive suffering endured by the Burundian people, the international community reacted by denouncing the President's assassination and the continuing mass murder of innocent people. One rapid measure taken by the international community was to impose an economic embargo on Burundi. Economic cooperation between the government of Burundi and the international community ceased. Only cooperation in the provision of humanitarian assistance continued.

What roles were played by the Bishops?

On October 24, 1993, two days after the assassination of the President, the Catholic Bishops and two Protestants Bishops met and issued a message of peace to the population.

Since there was no functioning government; the Bishops conference delegated two Bishops to monitor the situation. In close collaboration with members of the civil society, the two Bishops delegated by the Conference took the initiative to establish a “crisis cell” to handle the situation. Their actions convinced the government to regain control of the situation. This action was very delicate because of the different political views. The opposition parties were advocating for a new political orientation for the country. However, this situation led to renewed talks between different political actors.

The Bishops played an important role in mediating these talks. They also met with NGOs and participated in emergency relief efforts to assist internally-displaced persons (CRS and Caritas were among the first organizations to deliver relief services). Parallel to the mediation, the Bishops did everything possible to end the indiscriminate killing of innocent civilians. To summarize the Bishops’ role in the aftermath of the 1993 crisis, I can say that:

- The efforts of the Bishops were instrumental in diminishing the killing of civilians in places where they could intervene;
- Their participation facilitated the organization of humanitarian assistance in several parishes and sites for the displaced throughout the country;
- Their active participation brought a comfort to the suffering population while sending a message of courage to religious and sacerdotal communities, and educational institutes in parishes. Pastoral messages were sent on a regular basis to different sectors (political class, Christian communities) advocating for peace.

Observations

Feeling powerlessness during the decade of blind violence, we found ourselves, at times, overwhelmed by the situation. We had never experienced massacres of such amplitude. We witnessed the progressive armament of the population: machetes, arrows, guns (mugobore, Kalashnikov), mines, heavy artillery, fighter planes, etc.

The media (press, radio, TV, internet) was more or less organized. Armed militias started organizing themselves and became real rebellion groups. The regular army in its turn constituted local defense groups called “guardians of peace.”

The helplessness feelings in front of massive suffering of civilians and such a scale of murders based on ethnic belongings was resented by us with deep pain. This feeling manifested itself when we had to elaborate and propose a face-to-face dialogue of all actors involved in the conflict. This created in many people misunderstanding towards

our stand. However, we succeeded in building a neutral space for dialogue because of our strong conviction that dialogue among all conflicting parties was the solution to ending the crisis that has plagued the country since the assassination of President Ndadaye.

The support of the international community was crucial in making this happen. An array of actors, ranging from the former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, the late President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, and former South African President Nelson Mandela as well as actors in the region, were also instrumental in fostering a climate of dialogue, which culminated with the Arusha peace talks.

During the Arusha Peace negotiation and later on, the Bishops' roles became more discrete in order to allow the different protagonists to play fully their role. We had to accompany, encourage and at times stand clear of public opinion and decisions-makers who had a vested interest in the situation.

The reconstruction phase

After Arusha, Pretoria, and the Dar es Salaam agreements, there has been a need to reconstruct the country's infrastructure and institutions, including the constitution, the legislature, government administration, the military, the police, the judiciary, and the economic and social sectors. We need to create a new cultural environment to rebuild the frayed social fabric, and to instill strong social and political values, such as good governance, property rights, stewardship of the common good, and willingness to work to be free from misery.

Conclusion

The CPN is enlisted in this evolution. I wish to take out of this gathering a clear and precise insight, based on a theologically more pertinent ethic, to further advance the role of the Church in peace and reconciliation in Burundi.

Our project of a pastoral synod, which focuses on peace and reconciliation, needs to be reinvigorated. I hope that all of our deliberations, debates, and presentations will greatly contribute to increasing our knowledge about what we have planned so far for our synod.

Thank you.