

[In a miraculous escape from Rwanda...]

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Abstract (Summary)

An exhausted Monique Mujawamariya arrived in Brussels aboard a military aircraft -- following a harrowing five days in which she huddled in her attic as soldiers killed her neighbors, said Susan Osnos, public affairs director for the U.S. human rights group Africa Watch.

In an interview from New York, Osnos said Mujawamariya had left Rwanda after being designated an honorary Canadian citizen.

Last year at Kigali airport, as an international commission of inquiry into Rwanda's human-rights record was about to board its plane back to Europe, the chief torturer for the Rwandan secret police came up and whispered in Mujawamariya's ear that she could soon be a dead woman.

Full Text (544 words)

Montreal Gazette moved file photo of Mujawamariya last Friday on Southam photo network.

OTTAWA -- After a miraculous escape from death squads trying to hunt her down, the head of war-torn Rwanda's human rights movement fled to Europe on Wednesday under diplomatic protection from Canada.

An exhausted Monique Mujawamariya arrived in Brussels aboard a military aircraft -- following a harrowing five days in which she huddled in her attic as soldiers killed her neighbors, said Susan Osnos, public affairs director for the U.S. human rights group Africa Watch.

In an interview from New York, Osnos said Mujawamariya had left Rwanda after being designated an honorary Canadian citizen.

Mujawamariya, who has difficulty walking and was unable to take the pain of her confinement anymore, bluffed her way past an army patrol outside her home in the Rwandan capital, Kigali, by flashing a photo of a man in military garb she said was her husband.

She then made contact with a local Christian cleric she knew, who drove her to a Kigali hotel, which has been serving as a press centre for foreign journalists.

Foreign diplomats made arrangements to have the 39-year-old activist evacuated, on the understanding that "she was to be treated as a Canadian citizen," said Osnos.

Because international relief flights, operated on behalf of the United Nations and western governments, are only evacuating foreign nationals or persons deemed equivalent, Mujawamariya was told the priest who helped her could not be evacuated with her, Osnos said.

But Mujawamariya told authorities he "was her businessman husband" and she wasn't leaving without him, Osnos said. They both boarded the flight for Brussels.

In Ottawa, a spokesman for Foreign Affairs Minister Andre Ouellet credited Montreal's International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development and its president, Ed Broadbent, for spearheading international efforts to save Mujawamariya and having an "abiding interest in her cause."

In Montreal, Broadbent released a statement saying that in Rwanda, men and women like Mujawamariya "are targeted in the current wave of fighting, and they are the ones who will have the task of rebuilding the country when the crisis is off the front pages of our newspapers."

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Weeks before that, shortly before the commission's arrival in Rwanda, she was badly injured in an automobile "accident" that it was made clear was arranged as a warning of worse to come.

Last week, as the civil war erupted, Mujawamariya was on the phone to a friend and colleague in the U.S. when soldiers burst in her door after dragging people from neighboring homes and shooting them dead on the street corner.

"I don't want you to hear this," she told her American friend -- an Africa Watch board member.

She hobbled into the bushes outside her home, hid for hours in heavy rain and then, at night, snuck back into her house and spent the next four days in a pre-arranged hiding place in her ceiling. She stayed there until she dared to make her break this week.