

Fate of human-rights activist unknown as phone goes dead: UN commander turned down her plea for help; [FINAL Edition]

DAVE TODD. The Vancouver Sun. Vancouver, B.C.: Apr 12, 1994. pg. A.9

Abstract (Summary)

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 army's secret police came up and whispered a death threat in [Monique Mujawamariya]'s ear.

International human rights organizations are outraged over the refusal of the United Nations military commander in Rwanda -- Canadian Maj.-Gen. Romeo Dallaire -- to help Mujawamariya the day before she disappeared.

[Illustration] Black & White Photo; DUSAN VRANIC; AP; OFFERING COMFORTING EMBRACE, A MAN PUTS HIS ARMS AROUND A WEEPING WOMAN ON HER ARRIVAL IN BRUSSELS ON MONDAY FROM WAR-TORN RWANDA. MOST FOREIGN NATIONALS HAVE FLED THE CENTRAL AFRICAN COUNTRY WHERE ETHNIC FIGHTING BETWEEN THE HUTU AND TUTSI TRIBES HAS CLAIMED AN ESTIMATED 10,000 LIVES.

Full Text (625 words) (Copyright The Vancouver Sun)

OTTAWA - Thousands of people have been slaughtered since Rwanda was plunged into civil war, international observers say, and most of them are like civilians killed in any war: innocent bystanders.

Monique Mujawamariya was innocent, but no bystander.

Is, not was, fellow human rights activists around the world prefer to say, as they hope against hope she may still be alive after an army death squad came hunting for her last Thursday at her home in the Rwandan capital, Kigali.

Mujawamariya was on the phone to a friend and colleague in the United States as the soldiers burst in her door after dragging people from neighboring houses and shooting them dead on the street corner.

"Please take care of my children," she told Alison DesForges in Buffalo, N.Y. "I don't want you to hear this." Then she hung up. Human-rights colleagues said her children were not with her at the time.

Whatever her fate, the 39-year-old director of the Rwandan Association for Human Rights and Public Freedom is already a legend, both in her own country and neighboring Burundi and Zaire.

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 army's secret police came up and whispered a death threat in Mujawamariya's ear.

Weeks earlier, shortly before the international commission's arrival in Rwanda, she had been hurt badly in an automobile "accident" that was made clear to her had been arranged as a warning.

She was left badly scarred. But it was clear in an interview months later in New York, that she now wore those wounds on her face as badges of courage.

Mujawamariya's translator for that interview was DesForges, a historian and board member of the U.S. human-rights organization Africa Watch.

It is already evident that Mujawamariya will not disappear easily into the dark night engulfing her country. Too many people are vowing to ensure that her story is told.

Just four months ago last weekend, she sipped coffee in U.S. President Bill Clinton's office and was honored not only for work in Rwanda but as a beacon for the cause of human liberty throughout her region of Africa.

As the Washington Post editorialized at the time, more truly than it knew: "In a way, she is also a proxy for women and men like herself who live unprotected in often dangerous places promoting the observance of human rights against stiff odds."

What will America do now to help her -- if that is still possible -- and to stand up for the principles Mujawamariya has embodied?

The question of what Canada might do is just as pertinent.

International human rights organizations are outraged over the refusal of the United Nations military commander in Rwanda -- Canadian Maj.-Gen. Romeo Dallaire -- to help Mujawamariya the day before she disappeared.

Spurning her personal appeal to him as the violence in Kigali mounted, Dallaire said he was too busy to attend to her safety. Other UN officials told her they were not equipped to deal with individual cases, anyway. The U.S. embassy told her she should deal with the UN.

By last weekend, western embassies and international organizations were powerless to help their own locally engaged Rwandan workers and their families. The UN said it was not empowered, under its mandate, to move out its local staff.

Credit: SOUTHAM NEWS