

Refugees tell of violence, political strife in Burundi

by [Mike Pflanz](#) in the [May 25, 2016](#) issue

[\(The Christian Science Monitor\)](#) Why the militia came for Nolasque Nduwimana, a history teacher at a girls' Catholic boarding school in Burundi, was obvious.

"Yes, I supported the opposition," he said. "Why should that mean I should be killed?"

Nduwimana learned that his name was on a hit list drawn up by local ruling party officials. He made up his mind to flee but wanted to finish marking his students' exams first.

Just before Easter, close to midnight, five armed men broke into his room and forced him to the floor. At that moment, another teacher distracted the men, and Nduwimana seized his chance, fleeing barefoot into the night disguised as a priest.

"The church is all the militia respect anymore," he said.

For several days he refused to leave his tent in the refugee camp in Tanzania, 30 miles from the Burundian border, run by the UN Refugee Agency. Nduwimana is still visibly frightened. This camp is too close to Burundi, he said.

"People can find me here," he said, his lips tightening.

[A year ago, Pierre Nkurunziza, Burundi's president, declared that he would run for a third term of office despite a constitutional two-term limit.](#) His announcement, later approved by the courts, sparked street protests, which were followed by security crackdowns.

A ruling party militia, the Imbonerakure, swept the country, hunting down opponents. And antipresidential armed gangs sprang up.

[One gang attacked an Anglican church, St. Mark's, in Bujumbura, Burundi's capital, in December, killing a boy and injuring two people, the Anglican Communion News Service reported.

The Anglican Province of Burundi told ACNS that attacks were common in the capital, but not usually against churches.]

In the past year hundreds died and more than a quarter of a million Burundians fled to neighboring countries. Half of them went to Tanzania.

Refugees in the Democratic Republic of the Congo report that pro-regime enforcers have been crossing the border to intimidate and attack opponents. And members of the opposition earlier this year described Burundi's police force using ethnic rhetoric, hinting at the parallels between Burundi and neighboring Rwanda, where nearly 1 million ethnic Tutsis were slaughtered in the 1994 genocide.

As independent domestic media have been shuttered and foreign journalists have been denied visas, the accounts of refugees are among the first to emerge from Burundi in recent months.

"What happened to my family has no real reason," said one refugee who escaped recently, giving his name only as Ernest. His parents and three sisters died when somebody threw a grenade into their house. Men had come knocking again and again, asking for money that his father did not have in order to pay "membership dues" for the ruling party.

Ernest thinks it was likely a matter of extortion. "Injustice is all that thrives in my country today," he said.

Abdul Yamuremye, a scrap metal dealer, similarly does not understand why his family was targeted. "There had been lots of strange boys around the neighborhood," Yamuremye said. "They looked at me, then they rubbed their hands together like they were pretending to wash clothes. They said, 'We're going to clean you people from this place like this.'"

Yamuremye and his family are now sheltering at the UNHCR camp. Their mental wounds are fresh, but the UNHCR and its partners can offer them no more than basic counseling.

"Our donor appeal is so overwhelmingly underfunded that we are only barely able to provide shelter, household items, latrines, and showers," said Dost Yousafzai, a UNHCR official running the three camps in this district.

“Things like counseling support for people who have survived horrific experiences,” Yousafzai said, “very sadly fall by the wayside.”

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