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INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS (ICFTU)

ICFTU OnLine...

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"If it wasn't for the intervention of the ICFTU and its partners, we would not have been released after a week"

Brussels, 28th October 2004 (ICFTU Online): Célestin Nsavyimana is vice president and treasurer of the trade union confederation of Burundi, COSYBU, affiliated to the ICFTU, and first national secretary of the national union of transport workers. His arrest on 24 September 2004, together with the president of COSYBU, Pierre-Claver Hajayandi, led to the ICFTU campaign that contributed to securing their release a week later (see ICFTU OnLine of 27 September). We met up with him just a few days after he was freed.

How did your arrest come about?

On Friday 24 September, I was at the COSYBU headquarters when a police officer arrived and asked me for information concerning our organisation. He presented me with a search warrant signed by the Attorney General. I told him that I was willing to cooperate with his investigations. We gave him a diskette with the files on our computers and copies of a draft trade union declaration regarding the political situation in Burundi. In the meantime, I had called the president of COSYBU, who had come to our offices. I left for an hour to go to work (I'm a navigation inspector), and came back to the COSYBU headquarters to find a number of chief intelligence officers, accompanied by more police officers. They were arguing with the president of COSYBU, as they wanted to take the computers away to the headquarters of the Special Intelligence Services. We protested, but to no avail.

The intelligence service chiefs then went on to tell us that we (the President and I) also had to accompany them. We argued that according to the Code of Criminal Procedure in force in Burundi, an arrest warrant issued by the Attorney General is required to detain someone. They retorted that it was an order of the Inspector-General of Intelligence. They filled in a document summoning us to the Intelligence headquarters, on the grounds that we constituted "a threat to the internal security of the State". No one was able to tell us why we represented such a threat. To avoid any incidents, we had to agree to follow them, with the computers. We reached the Special Intelligence offices at around 12.30 pm and were isolated in dungeons, despite our verbal protests.

What happened during your detention?

For the first five days we were isolated in separate dungeons, unable to communicate with each other or the outside world, unable to read the newspapers or listen to the radio. On the second day, a police officer came to interrogate us for about 15 minutes on the workings of our organisation, our rules, etc.. Following these questions he asked what I wanted, and I replied that I wanted to be released unconditionally, and that, in future, they comply with the law, with the right to freedom of association, which is enshrined in the Constitution and the conventions on trade union freedoms ratified by Burundi.

On the fifth day we were authorised to talk to those who brought us food from outside. Two days later, a Belgian trade union delegation which was in Burundi at the time was allowed to come and visit me, along with other trade union colleagues from Burundi. We were released that same evening ... and called to an audience with the president of Burundi, acting in compliance with the demand put forward by the ICFTU, which had recommended that the authorities should enter into an ongoing dialogue with the unions.

What role did the ICFTU's action play in your release?

Without this action I don't think we would have been released after seven days. The Criminal Procedure Code limits custody to seven days, renewable once. It may have been renewed if it wasn't for the intervention of the ICFTU and other partners, and we may have been transferred to prison. I was greatly encouraged when news was leaked to me during my detention that a campaign was underway. Janek Kuczkiewicz, ICFTU's trade union rights representative, was interviewed on the subject by Radio France International, a station that is picked up in Burundi. Our arrest actually created a lot of commotion in Burundi, especially since it was the first time that the Intelligence Services had confiscated an organisation's work tools (they recently returned the computers to us).

Are arrests of this kind common in Burundi?

Yes, it's becoming a habit. Earlier this year, a number of leaders from teachers' unions were arrested. I myself was arrested for six days in 2002 during a teachers' strike. The Intelligence Services said that I was behind this strike, which is completely untrue. Having said that, the president of the Republic announced to the trade union leaders he

met with on the evening of our release and the following day that as of now on there would be a permanent dialogue between trade unions and the authorities, and there would be no reoccurrence of such arrests.

What motivates you to keep up the fight in spite of such violent repression?

The nature of my work as a navigation inspector means that I see how the sailors and dockworkers suffer. They toil so hard for such low wages.

I feel it is important to defend all these employees through the trade union, to at least try to better the working conditions and the health and safety conditions in the transport sector as a whole. In Burundi, the only civil society organisations that are national in scope are the unions; so they are the best placed to defend the interests of the population at large.

What is COSYBU's current priority?

The defence of our members' socio-professional interests. There is widespread poverty in Burundi. According to estimates made in 2002, an average household (a couple and three children) needs at least 350,000 francs (around 250 euros) a month to pay for the rent, basic foodstuffs and school expenses. At present, an average employee, already several years into his or her career, does not even earn 50 euros a month. It's a really complicated task to live in these conditions. Some have little jobs on the side; others only eat once a day. The rural areas, where 95% of the population lives, are also suffering. The war has led to the displacement of many people, and the climate has been very harsh over the last ten years. As a result, people are now suffering from malnutrition, whereas they used to be able to grow enough food to survive.

What is the political situation like at the moment?

In 2001, the Arusha agreements on peace and national reconciliation were signed by the political parties, but not by the armed movements. Since 2002, ceasefire agreements have been signed by all the groups with the exception of one, which is operating in the highland areas of the capital. There is still sporadic fighting, but around 90% of the population enjoys relative peace. The current government is transitional; it groups some 17 parties. A draft Constitution still has to be put to referendum; we had prepared a declaration on this issue before our arrest.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

The ICFTU represents 148 million workers through its 234 affiliated national trade union centres in 152 countries and territories. ICFTU is also a member of Global Unions: <http://www.global-unions.org>

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