



Rwanda's ex-U.N. ambassador, who vanished after genocide, resurfaces in Alabama

By David L. Bosco
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In the spring of 1994, when the assassination of Rwanda's president unleashed a horrific three-month genocide that would ultimately kill 800,000 people, Rwanda's man at the United Nations assured the world's diplomats that his government was not to blame.

By a coincidence of history, Rwanda held one of 10 rotating seats on the U.N. Security Council at the time, giving Jean Damascene Bizimana, the country's 36-year-old ambassador, a place at the table for the council's private deliberations. Bizimana, a rising star in Rwanda's diplomatic corps, initially told his fellow ambassadors that the violence was due to spontaneous public outrage over the president's death on April 6 and that the interim government he now represented would quickly reestablish order.

As violence escalated, he blamed rebel forces from the country's Tutsi ethnic minority for all the trouble, insisting to the council on April 21 that the rebellion "must be made responsible for its attitude in wishing to continue hostilities, to perpetuate the current violence and to continue to perpetrate massacres." In May, he voted against an arms embargo on Rwanda that every other member of the council supported.

However, in the weeks that followed, as the government's direct responsibility for the mounting deaths became increasingly clear, Bizimana spoke out less and less. He became a "sullen and mostly silent" figure at Security Council meetings, and he "never showed the slightest sign of remorse about what was going on in his country," former British ambassador David Hannay told me.

Shortly after the rebels captured the Rwandan capital in July and overthrew the extremist interim regime, the young ambassador disappeared. Diplomats from the incoming government who took over Rwanda's U.N. mission on East 39th Street in Manhattan found the bank accounts empty and the offices stripped bare. Even the refrigerator and the stereo were gone.

Sixteen years later, the Rwandan government is still investigating whether Bizimana supported the genocide in his capacity at the United Nations, according to Andrew Tusabe, a counselor at the Rwandan Embassy in Washington. "Bizimana has not been forgotten," he told me. But he said they had not been able to determine his whereabouts.

It seemed that the ambassador, along with his wife and two small children, had simply vanished -- until he turned up living quietly in the small town of Opelika, Ala., a few miles up the road from Auburn University. He's an American citizen now. He works for a plastics company. And he doesn't want to talk about genocide.

As I researched a book on the Security Council over the past few years, Bizimana's story stuck with me. His role in supporting the genocide is unclear; after all, he was not in the country when the killings occurred. But he chose to remain in his post when the interim government began its butchery, and he repeated the regime's talking points. The new government threatened to arrest him on war crimes charges after he disappeared, and his immediate superior, former foreign minister Jerome Bicamumpaka, has been tried by a U.N. tribunal for conspiracy to commit genocide and is awaiting a verdict.

Canadian Gen. Romeo Dallaire, who was dispatched to Rwanda in 1993 as commander of a small U.N. peacekeeping force charged with safeguarding a cease-fire between the government and the rebels, is convinced that Bizimana was tied to the extremist circles that planned the mass killings. Dallaire pleaded fruitlessly with the Security Council for more authority and resources to intervene both before and during the genocide, and he blames Bizimana for misleading council members about conditions on the ground and for keeping the regime's leaders informed of the council's discussions.

Though Hannay, the British ambassador, doubts that Bizimana remained in close contact with his capital city once the killings began, Dallaire told me that Bizimana and top officials in Rwanda used satellite phones to stay in touch even as the carnage was raging. Regime officials, Dallaire wrote in his memoir, "were always ahead of me in the field and could adjust to any initiative I tried. Through [Bizimana] they knew exactly what the council was going to do."

I started looking through public records databases in the United States. Many Rwandan expatriates have settled in Upstate New York, but to my surprise, Bizimana's name and number came up with an address in Opelika, a city of fewer than 30,000 people, beginning in the summer of 1994. When I called, the woman answering the phone identified herself as Bizimana's wife and confirmed that her husband had been a U.N. ambassador. She agreed to pass on a message, but I never heard back.

Late last year, I decided to pay Bizimana a visit, on the off chance that he would talk to me and answer questions about his actions at the United Nations. About 100 miles from the Birmingham airport, after driving through Talladega County and past the International Motorsports Hall of Fame, I arrived in Opelika, the place where Jean Damascene Bizimana had chosen to build his new life.

Opelika has had a few brushes with fame. President Franklin Roosevelt passed through in 1939 on his way to Warm Springs, Ga., and during World War II, Opelika housed a camp for German prisoners of war. Hollywood briefly descended on the city in 1978 to film "Norma Rae," starring Sally Field. And at a downtown chicken-fingers restaurant,

residents proudly reminded me that Robert Gibbs, President Obama's spokesman, hails from Auburn.

I found Bizimana's modest, one-story house in a leafy, middle-class subdivision about a mile from downtown. It was early on a Friday morning, and I was hoping to catch the former diplomat as he left for work, without disturbing his family. When I pulled up across the street, I saw a pair of cats in the yard and five cars in the driveway, including a Cadillac with vanity plates. One by one, the family members left the house, but there was no sign of the ambassador. I finally knocked on the door. No answer. A neighbor who said she knew the family slightly -- she occasionally drives to the mall with Bizimana's wife, she explained -- gave me the name of the company where Bizimana works.

Capitol Plastics Products is in a glass office building in one of the tidy new technology parks that dot the area around Opelika and Auburn. The company, which makes containers for the dairy and pharmaceutical industries, has a manufacturing plant in France, which accounts for the French flag that flies alongside the U.S. and Alabama flags outside the headquarters. While I waited for Bizimana, the receptionist informed me that he worked as a quality-control manager. She had heard that he was a former diplomat, she confided, and thought he might be from Algeria.

After about 10 minutes, Bizimana appeared in the lobby wearing a white lab coat and a hair net. We shook hands, and I explained that I was researching his role on the Security Council during the killings in Rwanda. He stared at my business card for a long while. Speaking quietly, he said that it was late on a Friday afternoon and that he had a meeting to attend. I offered to meet him outside of work hours, but he demurred. I explained what Gen. Dallaire had said about his role in assisting the regime, and invited him to respond. He shook his head.

Finally, Bizimana looked at me and said simply, "This has nothing to do with my current job."

A few moments later, he turned and walked back through the double doors. He and his company have declined my interview requests since.

In the years since the Rwandan genocide, political leaders, activists and scholars have struggled to understand how such a massive killing campaign could have happened -- and why the world largely stood by. Although Bizimana's presence on the Security Council was maddening to people like Dallaire, it is clear that none of the council's major powers was ready to intervene to stop the violence.

After a failed operation in Somalia, which the United States departed in humiliation, the Clinton administration was determined to avoid further entanglements in Africa. "Our opposition to retaining a [peacekeeping] presence in Rwanda is firm," then-Secretary of State Warren Christopher cabled to the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Madeleine Albright, on April 15, 1994.

The French had close ties with Hutu leaders in Rwanda, while Russia and China were suspicious of any U.N. involvement in the internal affairs of other count

If Bizimana was indeed in constant contact with his superiors in Kigali, his message would have been simple: The Security Council had no will to intervene.

Years later, some of the world's powers expressed regret for their inaction. In March 1998, during a visit to Rwanda, President Bill Clinton acknowledged that "we in the United States and the world community did not do as much as we could have and should have done to try to limit what occurred." And just a few weeks ago, President Nicolas Sarkozy of France admitted his country's "serious errors of judgment" during the genocide.

Bizimana does not appear inclined to reckon with the past, and legally at least, he has no reason to do so. Opelika records show that he registered to vote in October 2004 and has cast ballots in primaries and general elections since then -- meaning he acquired U.S. citizenship. And as a citizen, he enjoys full due-process rights. Even if Rwanda were to bring charges against him, it wouldn't matter; there is no extradition treaty between the United States and Rwanda.

Perversely, his most likely path to citizenship was through political asylum. U.S. law protects individuals with a well-founded fear of persecution in their home countries by allowing them to become permanent residents, thus opening a path to citizenship. (Rwanda's ambassador in Washington during the genocide, Aloys Uwimana, took that route.) Asylum proceedings are not public, so it is difficult to know whether Bizimana applied. Still, with the new government threatening to arrest him back in 1994, he would have had little difficulty showing that his life would be in danger in Rwanda.

However, asylum officers normally investigate applicants' stories to find out whether they were involved in the persecution of others, which is grounds for denial of an application. So if he did seek asylum, Bizimana must have artfully minimized his official role in representing genocidal authorities. Diplomats who served with him describe his uncanny ability to fade into the background, a skill that probably served him well as he established his new life in Opelika.

Michael Barnett, a member of the U.S. delegation to the United Nations during the Rwanda crisis, recalls that, at many points during Security Council discussions, it felt as though Bizimana "wasn't even in the room. . . . He was unwilling or unable to engage."

At the same time, with the killings underway in his country, Barnett recalls, the ambassador's mere presence was surreal. "The genocide wasn't just out there," he said. "It was in the Security Council."

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