

# Eyewitness Testimony by Esperance Mukashema on RPF army massacres at Gakurazo, Rwanda

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*kotanyi-nkaramaraso Innocent Kabandana  
ikomeza kwidagembya kugeza ryari?*

Gen Innocent Kabandana

*This testimony was attached to the [letter sent by Mrs Esperance Mukashema to the US Secretary of State John Kerry](#) on 18th February 2013 relating to the role of Brigadier General Kabandana in pre-planned Gakurazo massacres which claimed, among others, her son's life.*

**Witness Testimony on the Massacre of Bishops and other church officials by Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPA) soldiers and officers on June 5, 1994 at in Gakurazo, Rwanda .**

My name is Esperance Mukashema. I am a survivor of the Rwanda genocide. I am of Tutsi ethnicity, as were my mother and father. I was married to the late Gasana Cyprien who was also Tutsi. My late husband was killed by Interahamwe Militia members at the beginning of the Genocide.

I miraculously survived the attacks in which most of my family perished and was able to get help in escaping to the compound of the Josephite Brothers order at Gakurazo, in the Gitarama region of Rwanda. The Josephite Brothers hosted and protected me and many other Tutsi throughout the period of the Genocide until July 1994 when the RPA, the Army of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, captured and took control of the Gitarama region.

The following is my personal, eyewitness testimony concerning a massacre that was committed by members of the RPA at Gakurazo in which my son, Richard Sheja, was one of the victims.

The RPA attacked and captured the town of Kabgayi on June 2, 1994. Kabgayi is a historical city well known for its religious significance. It was headquarters of the region's Catholic Church Diocese and home of Catholic bishops, priests, nuns and brothers belonging to a wide range of religious congregations and associations with members from all genders and ages. The city is also home to many primary and secondary schools, seminaries, colleges and a major hospital. Kabgayi used to be a town that everyone considered as safe.

At the time of the RPA's capture of Kabgayi, there was a very large number of internally displaced people and refugees who had already sought refuge in the town. These people had fled their homes in fear of being killed. They came to Kabgayi and sought refuge in the premises of the Catholic Diocese because they believed that their proximity to the bishops would ensure their safety. Prior to the 1994 genocide, Catholic clergy had historically wielded a very strong social influence and were very respected and obeyed. Their voice carried a lot of weight. It was believed by many people that the militia responsible for the genocide in other parts of the country would not dare attack this "holy city" and fatally harm the religious leaders and members of the various religious organizations who were living in Kabgayi or the refugees who had sought shelter with them.

What the Interahamwe militia dared not do, (attack the religious leaders and the refugees under their protection), the RPA did.

Three bishops were present at Kabgayi at that time of its capture by the RPA: Mgr Thaddee Nsengiyumva (the Bishop of Kabgayi), Mgr. Vincent Nsengiyumva (the Archbishop of Kigali), and Joseph Ruzindana (the Bishop of Byumba). With the bishops were a large number of other high ranking members of the clergy, including assistant bishops, priests, nuns, brothers, lay church leaders and youth leaders.

The attack against the town of Kabgayi, was carried out by the 157th Battalion of the RPA, which was commanded by Col (now Lt. General) Fred Ibingira. Following the capture of Kabgayi, the RPA moved all the non-clergy displaced persons and refugees to the locality of Gakurazo. I and my three kids (eight year old son, six year old daughter and four year old son), had already taken refuge at Gakurazo for more than two months.

However, the bishops, other priests and their staff were first taken to a place called Ruhango, where they were held, under constant guard, in a house close to the municipality office.

On June 5, 1994 the bishops and other clergy members were transferred again from Ruhango to Gakurazo, where the non-clergy had been moved to. The RPA officers told the Bishops that they were being moved to Gakurazo because Gakurazo was a clean and pleasant place befitting their status. The bishops and other clergy members arrived at Gakurazo around 12 pm under the escort of soldiers who were under the command of Major (now Brigadier General) Wilson Gumisiriza, who was assisted by, among other officers, Lieutenant Innocent Kabandana, Lieutenant Wilson Ukwishaka and Sergeant John Butera.

Upon arrival at Gakurazo, the Bishops (under the leadership of Archbishop Vincent Nsengiyumva of Kigali Diocese led prayers in the Chapel while a Burundian priest in charge of the Novitiate made sure that there were enough rooms for accommodating the members of the clergy who had been transferred from Ruhango. During the course of the evening of that fateful day, the soldiers who had accompanied the bishops and other clergy members from Ruhango summoned the clergy members to attend a meeting in the cafeteria. The bishops and the clergy members duly complied and took seats in the cafeteria. The Vicar-General of Kabgayi, Mgr. Innocent Gasabwoya, had my son seating on his lap.

Myself also was in the cafeteria at the beginning of what we thought was a genuine meeting. While I was stepping out of the room to take my sleepy son to bed, my daughter followed us. Before I could reach the door of the cafeteria, some RPA soldiers entered and ordered the females to get out of the room immediately. On my way out, one of the soldiers suggested to

also take my son Richard with me, but when I went back, Mgr Gasabwoya told me that the kid was in safe hands. Everyone else, except the bishops and the clergy, was asked to leave the cafeteria. As I was entering into my room, I heard shootings coming from the cafeteria. I heard my son yelling, calling mom for help. I returned to the cafeteria and witnessed the massacre. The RPA soldiers totally ignored my son plea and shot him in his back. All the people who had stayed in the cafeteria were shot dead by RPA soldiers. Only one priest miraculously survived the gruesome carnage.

After the massacre, Lieutenant Ukwishaka blew a whistle calling for attention and gathered all the refugees into the courtyard. The officer told us that the massacre that had just taken place had been carried out by one soldier who wanted to revenge his own family. The officer then took us to the cafeteria to show us the bodies of the victims.

There were bank notes of currencies from many countries (including US dollars and Rwandan Francs) spread all over the floor of the cafeteria. The bishops had apparently hidden money under their cassocks. The RPA soldiers who were at the scene ordered the Burundian priest who was in charge of the Novitiate to pick up and put together all the money that was on the floor and give it to them.

The day after the massacre, the bodies of the victims were buried in a mass grave. It is during that time that it was reported that the French intervention mission in Rwanda (Operation Turquoise) was about to be deployed. RPA officer Kabandana came to Gakurazo again and ordered all the refugees to move to the locality of Kinazi, Gitarama. After we arrived at Kinazi, some RPA soldiers, including the above named Kabandana and Butera, came and instructed the Burundian priest, Brother Vivens, and Mgr Gasabwoya's brother to provide them with a truck to carry certain supplies. The soldiers also took away the three men and the three were never seen again. We presumed that they were killed by Butera and Kabandana.

Done at s'Heerenouek on February 18, 2013

Esperance Mukashema