

Thomas Kamilindi, BBC journalist in Kigali. Former Radio Rwanda journalist

Thomas Kamilindi: Good morning. I've been a journalist for 20 years. I've always worked in Rwanda before the genocide, during the genocide I couldn't, but then afterwards I continued, and I'm still continuing today. So my first question that I could ask you, and ask you yourselves to ask, should the journalists themselves be put on trial? Should they be judged? My answer is yes, and that's why I did, in fact, testify before the International Criminal Tribunal for the prosecution, and I testified against the person, who was the director of Rwanda Information Office, which was, and still is, the governmental press organization, which comprises media, radio, television, etc., because I consider that the journalists are citizens like any other member of the public, therefore they can be found guilty like anybody else, but also because I consider that the journalists have a major role to play for the good of society, and not for the problems of society, but problems were created in my society. Evil also did take place and the media played an important role in this.

So I'd like to give you the background really of the press in Rwanda, place it in context, because when we talk about the press, people in the west think perhaps that it's like it is in the western world. That's not the case. The press in Rwanda has existed since 1933. That was the year when the first newspaper was created. It is a newspaper, which still exists of the Catholic Church, and still exists today. The Catholic Church is very important in my country. And then in the '60s, a government newspaper was set up, both written in my mother tongue, in the native language of Rwanda, and that's all. There were other attempts also to create newspapers, but in fact they didn't lead anywhere, and in 1991 to explain what happened, there was an explosion if you will, a democratic explosion. There was a boom, and a large number of newspapers were created, but radio remained just a single single, which had been created in 1961. It remained unique, and it belonged to the government. So it was the voice of the authorities, and the authorities are respected in my country, and what the radio states, and the way people were educated and brought up in my country, what's stated on the radio is taken as word of gospel. In 1993, RTL M was born. It was created by people, who were in power, in fact, because the national radio, which was a single, unique radio station did not really belong to the people in power, because I have to say we weren't very free. So we contacted a strike, and I myself, I'm not boasting here, but the fact is I lead the strike. The strike was conducted to protest against the lack of independence. So professionally we wanted to report the facts as they actually took place, so that's why we called the strike. In 1992, the first television station emerged. It's the only one. It also belongs to the government. Therefore there's no pluralism there, as you would find in the west.

So that gives you some background of the press in Rwanda. Maybe this explains a few things to you. We're talking about Kangura, we're talking about RTL M. So the second question I'd like to ask you now, well it's a challenge really for you. Should the journalists, should they have worked, or could they have worked actually at the time, yes or no? They had to, but not to fight. Because the press is not there to fight, but rather to correct things, to actually state the real situation, because there was so much propaganda then, and people, in fact, they received so much hate messages. You can't imagine it.

For example, me. I'm here in front of you today. I have a daughter. She's 12 ½ now. She was very small at the time. One day somebody said, "that one is a snake. They have to kill her." She still wasn't even three years of age at the time. She said to me, "Daddy, am I a snake? Am I really a snake? RTLM said I was snake a thousand times. Kangura wrote that I was a snake." Is that the role of the press? Is that the role of the media to harm people? You can either harm people or you can do good, that's a choice. So it was possible to work at the time, but the person who could work, the only people who could work were the people in the camp of the killers. The "good guys" of the epoch. That's why I wasn't able to work. I wasn't in their camp, but I'm a radio journalist so I did still work.

There are a thousand ways in which you can work. When I was a refugee in the Hotel des Milles Collines, Francois-Xavier was there also, and he was a witness. So I asked the people, "what are you doing so the people could know that you're here?" And they said, "we're not doing anything." So I contacted a certain number of refugees like myself, and we had Francois-Xavier, who was a human rights activist, and had a lot of fax numbers, telephone numbers, all sorts of contacts. So we sent faxes and faxes, one on top of the other when the telephone worked. So therefore we informed the world of what was happening. In the Hotel des Milles Collines, I trained the refugees to become journalists, even though we couldn't speak. We could only speak through this way, but we did act. We did something.

Well 10 minutes is not a lot of time to tell you everything I want to tell you, so I'm going to jump over a lot of things. So should the journalists be placed on trial? Should they be judged? I think they should for the harm that they've done, and I'm proud that it's ICTR, without wanting to offend Mr. Biju Duval, Mr. Nahimana was condemned to prison for life. If he hadn't been convicted, then I myself would have concluded there was no justice. And if he's acquitted in appeal, I will state that. We have to be responsible for our acts. If I do some harm to somebody, then I have to answer for this. If I write something bad about somebody, I have to be responsible for that. You can all become journalists. So think about it, think about it carefully.

We talked about the role of the international media, and the international media weren't there. On April 12, 1994, all the foreigners were evacuated. All international public servants, all cooperants, including the journalists, they were all evacuated. The genocide took place over one or two weeks, nobody knew anything about it. It was in secrecy, and you need a few courageous people to come to the country, a country which didn't exist. There was no structure left. You can't imagine what it was like. So the people would have to start to know, but it was too late then. Thousands and thousands of people are being killed, and if the press had been there, then maybe the harm would have been less. On April 26, the telephones were being interrupted, and then they were restored, and I called some friends at Radio France International in Paris, and I said, "we're still alive," and they said, "we have no news, what's going on? Can we have an interview with you? Can you explain to us what's going on?" and I said, "yes". So they asked me how we were living, how many of us were there. There were about 700 refugees there, and we were drinking water from the swimming pool in which the military were supposed to

look after, where they actually did the washing of their clothes, and they transformed therefore the trend, and in fact, they used it as a washroom, and we had to drink that water without being able to boil it. And so they asked me, “what’s going on in military terms?” Well the government forces, I explained, are in fact, losing ground. There are defeats everywhere. I got this information from friends, and the massacres, and I explained to them, you can’t describe it. It’s indescribable. There are no terms for it. So the interview was broadcast, and the army decided therefore to bomb the hotel. That’s what I was told. But the people there stopped me from going out. Because I wanted to go out, I was the source of the problem, maybe they wouldn’t kill the others. If I were to be killed, maybe the others wouldn’t be bombed. So I had to conclude therefore that the government army didn’t want this to be known. And therefore if the press had played it’s role, I think therefore that things wouldn’t have happened that way. So justice is necessary, even for the press, even for the journalists. Thank you for your attention. Thank you.