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An appeal to the international community **Marguerite Barankitse**

For now over 27 years, I have been awarded numerous distinctions by the international community. Encouraged and motivated by this recognition, I have dedicated my life to the cause of defending human rights.

Today, driven by the trust you have given me, I am coming back to you to sound the alarm.

Among the distinctions I have received;

- **Armenia**, Inaugural Aurora Prize for the Awakening Humanity 2016;
- **Belgium**, Honorary Doctorate from the Catholic University of Louvain-La-Neuve in 2004; Jean REY International Prize of 2016; and the Equal Opportunity Prize in 2016;
- **Burundi**, Certificate of Merit in recognition of services rendered to the Nation, in 2006; and Certificate of Honor of the Republic of Burundi, 2013, by S.E President Pierre Nkurunziza;
- **Canada**, Certificate of Champion of International Human Rights, 2019;
- **France**, Medal of Defender of Human Rights in 1998, with 10 other people including the Dalai-Lama; Medal of Knight of the Legion of Honor of the French Republic in 2009; Chirac Prize for the prevention of conflicts by the Chirac foundation in 2011; Honorary citizenship of the city of Lille in 2013; Honorary doctorate by the Catholic University of Lille in 2011;
- **Germany**, Inspiring Women Worldwide 2014; Shalom Prize by the city of Eistät in 2000; Solidarity Prize by the city of Bremen in 2001;
- **Italy**, International Prize on Women's Migration 2007; Peace Prize of the region of Lombardy in 2007;
- **Netherlands**, Four Freedom award awarded by Franklin Eleanor Roosevelt Institute, for work around the protection of the rights of children, received by S.A.R the Queen Beatrice
- **Portugal**, North-South Prize by the Council of Europe (at the same time as the former President of Portugal, Mario Soares), 2000
- **South Africa**, Honorary Doctorate from Rhodes University in 2017
- **Spain**, Prize for the Defence of the Right of Asylum and Solidarity with Refugees by the Spanish Parliament, 2003
- **Sweden**, World's Children's Prize for the Rights of the Child, awarded by S.A.R the Queen Silvia of Sweden, 2003
- **United Kingdom**, The Guardian Achievements in International Development award 2009
- **USA**, Voice of Courage Award by the Commission for Women and Children, 2004; Honorary Doctorate by Duke University 2013; Emory University 2013; Seattle University 2018; Baker Prize for Excellence in Leadership, awarded by Baker Institute by James Baker 2017

United Nations Organizations

- **Unicef**, Unicef Prize 2008 awarded in Rome
- **UNHCR**, Nansen Award by S.A.R. Mathilde the Queen of Belgians in 2005

A PART OF OUR HUMANITY

A MOTHER'S CRY FOR HELP

Marguerite Barankitse

For now over 6 years, a human tragedy has been unfolding in Burundi, in full view of the world. A cruel regime is at the root of a real humanitarian catastrophe, which calls into question the international community's capacity to protect a population in danger. And yet, that community possesses the legal instruments to put an end to the ongoing atrocities, and it could take all of the credit and live up to its mission. However, for the time being, ignoring the suffering of the other is letting part of our common humanity in Burundi to die.

The disaster which is unfolding in Burundi started in 2015, when President Nkurunziza decided to run for a third term, in violation of the Constitution and the Arusha Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Burundi, which had been signed in 2000 thanks to the mediation of Nelson Mandela and the active support of the international community. This putsch against the founding texts triggered peaceful protests by a population which was fed up of the political and economic crimes perpetrated by the CNDD-FDD regime since it came to power in 2005. The police shoot the unarmed population, in front of international reporters, thereby triggering a system of repression which continues to date. The state of terror established since then by the CNDD-FDD regime has a chilling track-record. From 2015 to date, 2,500 political opponents have been murdered; thousands have disappeared; 11,000 political prisoners are living in subhuman conditions; thousands of women were raped and men were castrated; and almost half a million refugees fled the country. Not one day passes without lifeless bodies being found in the rivers, in the fields, or in the gutters, disfigured by torture perpetrated by the police, intelligence units or the sinister *Imbonerakure* militia. Terrorized, the relatives of the victims stay silent, trying to avoid the repression which awaits them if they dare to whisper their anger and distress at not even being able to bury their loved ones with dignity. For all this is happening in a context where political opponents, the civil society and independent media have been silenced and forced into exile so that the crimes against the population could continue behind closed doors. Faced with this unprecedented violence, the ICC opened an investigation into crimes against humanity in Burundi. Hundreds of survivors have been interviewed by investigators. However, the timing of justice doesn't mirror the urgency of human survival, such that the number of victims continue to multiply, while executioners believe they are untouchable.

As has happened in other places, the ongoing human tragedy in Burundi is also emboldened by the apparent abdication by the international community of their obligation to protect a population in danger. The community is aware of the dehumanizing speeches and calls for murder which the leaders of the terror regime pour out against their political opponents on a daily basis. The community knows that thousands of illegal militiamen patrol Burundi, extorting, raping and killing whomever they want, whenever they want. In other words, the community is aware that the instruments for mass crimes are already in place. Yet, both the UN and the AU seem to have resigned themselves to the worst. These two organizations, whose role is so important for world peace, didn't react to the rejection by the CNDD-FDD regime of their proposal to deploy security forces in Burundi, which would have created the conditions needed to start a national dialogue.

These organizations did not react when the mediators, Michael Kafando of the UN and Benjamin Mkapa of the EAC, were forced to throw the total faced with the regime's refusal to engage with its political opponents. The international community is well aware that the post-Nkurunziza Burundi is governed by generals who are under international sanction for having

been implicated in serious crimes against their population, yet she looks elsewhere. Taking advantage of this international amnesia, lobbyists are working behind the scenes to resume the economic cooperation between Europe and the CNDD-FDD regime, despite the ongoing crimes taking place in the country. Ignoring attempts to coax its regime, the CNDD-FDD paradoxically just condemned to a life sentence humanitarian workers, journalists, political opponents and human rights defenders, relying on the spurious grounds that they would have been putschist, thus transferring the responsibility on the victims. The same power which, in their early days, crowned me “National Mother” for my role in protecting children, have now condemned me to a life sentence!

However, and fortunately, in the dark periods of human history, where ignoring the other seems to take over the impulse of helping the other, we do uncover some bright parts of humanity. The CNDD-FDD regime looted modern infrastructures which had been built to support the population, financed by several organizations and private European family foundations. They looted organizations such as the hospital REMA, the microfinance bank, the schools, training centers, centers to rehabilitate traumatized youth, communal libraries etc. We were forced to flee to save our lives. And yet, during this time, we met human beings who honored humanity. The Rwandan government’s solidarity towards refugees has been exemplary. Our population was welcomed with dignity. They provided us with security and access to basic services. Thanks to the unwavering solidarity of friends of *Maison Shalom* around the world, we were able to rebuild our organization, providing psychological support to refugees who fled the terror of the state; giving scholarships to students; and offering traineeships to refugees. We have recently created the Ubuntu Academy, to equip our youth with scientific and technological skills, as well as the values of a culture of peace. For to us, the antithesis to barbarity are the humanist values of Ubuntu. In these moments of great suffering for the Burundian population, I also wish to thank from the bottom of my heart the diplomats, the parliamentarians, the human right defenders, the clergy, and the ordinary citizens from all over the world who increasingly refuse to condone the barbarity underway in the tropics. To all of you, I say thank you for your deep loyalty to “never again”. You embody the fight against the crumbling of memory, and against the political cynicism around our lives and the future of our children. Please know that, like many before them, the Burundian population stays standing and resilient. The population continues to fight for its survival; and continues to fight for a rule of law where freedom and physical, moral and economic security, are guaranteed for all.

As a mother, as a Christian, as a citizen of the world, as the winner of dozens of prizes awarded to me by many countries and international organizations for my commitment to the protection of children and peace, but also as a victim among other victims, I can only raise my people’s cry for help. I implore the international community not to turn a blind eye to the ongoing disaster taking place in Burundi. For there dies part of our common humanity.

Barankitse Marguerite
