



CIVIL COURAGE PRIZE

Acceptance Speech

Pierre Claver Mbonimpa

2017

Mr. Train, Distinguished guests,

On this noble and solemn occasion, allow me to address this gathering on behalf of the members of the Association for the Protection of Human Rights and the Rights of Prisoners in Burundi, as well as myself.

It was with great surprise that I received the letter on May 10, 2017, from the honorable John Train, Chairman of the Train Foundation, informing me I had been selected for the 2017 Civil Courage Prize. I was especially surprised as neither myself, nor the organization I am proud to represent, had submitted my candidacy for this prize.

I have since learned that the Civil Courage Prize is awarded to individuals around the world who stand out for their "steadfast resistance to evil at great personal risk"; and I am delighted to be included among them.

We must all recognize that there is no endeavor without risk, and that the same risk may be experienced to a greater or lesser extent. The career I have chosen as a human rights defender, today has become extremely dangerous, perhaps even as dangerous as serving in the armed forces.

Twenty-two years ago, I walked out of a prison in Bujumbura following two years of incarceration. The abuse to which myself and my fellow detainees were subjected motivated us to reflect on how we might change this situation. Soon after, with the support of others who believed in this cause, we set out to establish an organization which we baptized « Association pour la Protection des Droits Humains et des Personnes Détenues-APRODH ».

Following the creation of our association in 2001, we proceeded to engage in activities within the field of human rights protection and promotion in general, with a special focus on the rights of prisoners.

Some of the main activities we have undertaken over the course of our 17-year existence include: monitoring torture and abuse in prisons and detention centers, raising awareness about the national and international instruments related to human rights; fighting against

torture, sexual violence as well as other forms of gender-based violence; and providing advocacy and legal aid for victims of grave governmental oppression.

Denouncing injustice and cases of grave human rights violations has always been our primary focus—the price I have paid for this work has been 140 days in prison in 2014 and an attempt against my life in 2015.

On my way home that evening, I was shot at close range by a man later identified as being part of the National Intelligence Service, who no doubt had been sent to silence me once and for all. It was only by the grace of God that I was saved—because surviving a bullet to the head is nothing short of a miracle.

I am currently living in Brussels, where I was evacuated for specialized care following the attack, and from where I continue to pursue this fight resisting governmental evil in Burundi.

Since April 2015, our country has been in social and political turmoil because of President Nkurunziza's expressed intent to serve for a third term; despite opposition from Congress—80% of which is composed by the ruling party. The opposition and civil society groups along with political officials have responded energetically; engaging in protests to reject this violation of the country's constitution, and an illegal third term by President Pierre Nkurunziza.

There are widespread accounts of police and armed militias violently repressing largely peaceful demonstrations as well as persecution of those who oppose the President, throughout Bujumbura and its nearby provinces. It is estimated that at least a thousand people have been killed, 450 thousand have been exiled; at least ten civil society groups, including my own, have been raided or shut down; four television and radio stations have been shut down; and there are approximately 4,000 political detainees.

The honor of this award is not only bestowed upon myself but upon our organization, APRODH. It sends a powerful message of support and encouragement to know that the struggle for human rights in Burundi is echoed beyond our borders; and in one of the greatest nations of the world, the United States of America.

This is a great gesture of recognition, and an encouragement for me and fellow human rights defenders to continue to fight with dedication and determination—against all odds—to achieve rule of law in Burundi.

Mr. Chairman, on this unique occasion, I would like to take the opportunity to express my deepest gratitude to the jury for selecting me among the many deserving candidates; and to the Train Foundation for organizing this beautiful ceremony.

I would like to also thank all my colleagues in Burundi as well as the many international partners, who, near or far, have not ceased to provide support in the pursuit of our mission.

May this prize contribute to broader awareness of and respect for human dignity—in Burundi, Africa, and the world.

Long live The Train Foundation!

May there be respect for human Rights everywhere!

And may God bless you!

Thank you very much!