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<http://www.rsf.org/burundi-prosecutor-requests-life-09-05-2012,42587.html>

Africa - Burundi

Judicial travesty

Prosecutor requests life imprisonment for journalist charged with terrorism

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A prosecutor in the eastern city of Cankuzo yesterday requested life imprisonment for journalist **Hassan Ruvakuki** and 22 other people who are charged with "participating in acts of terrorism" by a new rebel group operating in the east of the country.

A reporter for *Bonesha FM* and the Swahili service of *Radio France Internationale*, Ruvakuki has been held since 28 November, after interviewing an alleged member of the rebel group, which is reportedly based in neighbouring Tanzania.

During yesterday's hearing in Cankuzo, lawyers representing 14 of the defendants, including Ruvakuki, refused to enter pleas, reiterating their position that the trial violates procedural rules and the most basic defence rights. The other nine defendants pleaded not guilty. Despite these flagrant irregularities, the court said it would proceed with the trial and adjourned until 20 June.

"It has already been demonstrated that this court is neither competent nor impartial, so the request for life sentences is just further evidence that the trial is a travesty orchestrated by the government," Reporters Without Borders said. "After more than five months in detention and the occasional grotesque hearing, Ruvakuki's hopes of an impartial and independent hearing have been dashed. The reputation of Burundi's justice system is at stake. It needs to ignore the political directives and hold a proper trial. " "Despite protests from the defence lawyers, Ruvakuki's employers, NGOs and bodies such as the Paris Bar Association, the Burundian authorities continue to turn a deaf ear to all the calls for a fair trial. If necessary, the legal battle will taken to the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights."

An appeal court in the central city of Gitega on 28 February rejected a defence petition (linked article in french) challenging the impartiality of the judges in Cankuzo and calling for the trial to be transferred to a different city. This decision was never notified to the defendants, as the defence lawyers pointed out during yesterday's hearing.

In a letter to justice minister Pascal Barandaqiye on 27 March, the deputy president of the Paris Bar Association condemned the "serious violation of defence rights" and called for "urgent measures to be taken so that Hassan Ruvakuki can be guaranteed the right to a fair trial before an independent and impartial court."

The failure to notify the defendants about the appeal court's decision was publicly condemned by the defence lawyers on 17 April. Ruvakuki's lawyer, Onésime Kabayabaya, said: "As long as the situation is not resolved, there will be no progress." The supreme court's spokesman told him the case was not urgent and would take the normal course.

[More information about Hassan Ruvakuki](#)

Photo: some of the people who are charged with "participating of acts of terrorism" (Esdras Ndikumana/AFP)

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