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Interview with Donatien Shimbi

Donatien Shimbi

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Donatien Shimbi was interviewed over Zoom on July 1st, 2022 by Ezra Schrader, with Kim Cadeau translating.

[02:13:19] ES: Where did you grow up?

DS/KC: I'm from the Banyamulenge community. I grew up in Katanga province, which is in the southeast of Congo. We were living at the time, in a place where Banyamulenge used to live, so we lived there in Dura, that's where we grew up. And Dura (?) is the district of Kareli(?). I left Dura in Katanga in 1998, and that's when we moved from Katanga. We fled from Katanga, in '98. It was because of the war that was going on. It started at the time that RCD (Rally for Congolese Democracy)

[Interruption]

DS/KC: So, as I was saying, we fled from Katanga in 1998, starting at the time of the formation of RCD, which was a rebellion group. Even though it had some Banyamulenge who were members of it, then, all over Congo they started attacking us, saying that, "the RCD is a Banyamulenge rebellion" so they started hunting everyone who was a Banyamulenge. So that's how we moved - we fled from Katanga at that time.

[2:16:21] ES: And when you fled from Katanga where did you go to, and were you with your family? Were you alone?

DS/KC: That's what I was going to say. I fled from Katanga with my whole family. We went to South Kivu. When we arrived in South Kivu, I decided to go and stay in Uvira. Uvira is located in South Kivu. Starting from late 1998 up to 2004. That's when we fled from Uvira toward Gatumba, which is in Burundi. We fled there because the war had started and they were targeting every Banyamulenge in that area. So, we crossed the border and went to Gatumba in Burundi.

[Interruption]

DS/KC: When we fled in Burundi, in Gatumba, in 2004, as you all know, we were attacked in that camp. After that massacre, I decided to go back to Congo. After I went to a place called Goma, which is in Northern Kivu. That's where I went to stay after the massacre in Gatumba. When we decided to move to Goma, shortly after that time, there was another outbreak of war between the government and CNDP (National Congress for the Defense of the People) - CNDP that was led by General Laurent Nkunda.

What we experienced at that time in Goma is that whenever there is an outbreak of war or conflict in Congo, as long as in that rebellion group or the movement they have

some Kinyarwanda speaker - whether they're Banyamulenge or not Banyamulenge - whenever they hear that they're Kinyarwanda speaker they start attacking even us civilian who speak Kinyarwanda. Since we were attacked in Burundi and many of us were killed starting that day, the experience I had in Gatumba, at that time, was in Goma. That's when I decided to move completely from near the borders of our country, so that's how I ended up coming here to Nairobi, Kenya. So that's why I'm here in Nairobi with my family, that's how we fled from there.

[2:20:24] ES: Going back from before you went to Goma, to the refugee camp - what was the atmosphere of the camp like before the violence, and then what was the atmosphere at Gatumba like after the violence - before you left?

DS/KC: In that refugee camp where we were hosted, it was one refugee camp, but it was separated into two sections of rows. In between, in that refugee camp, as I have said, it had two sections. One section was where the Banyamulenges were hosted, and the other section, was for the Burundians who were being repatriated from where they had fled, so the government of Burundi was receiving them on the other side so that they could prepare them to be sent in their former homes where they used to stay. So in between the two sections, there was an empty space - there was no house built in that space - the space in between was like 200 meters. According to our experience in that refugee camp, the Burundians who had been repatriated knew nothing about what was going to happen during the attack. In our section where we were, there was Banyamulenge and a few other Congolese from the community of Babembe. But we didn't find them there. We fled with them because we have been living with them, the few others who decided to flee together with Banyamulenge, we came with them until we arrived in Gatumba, where we were hosted. So, they were with us because they were also fleeing their fellow Babembe who were attacking Banyamulenge, and if they could find some of the Babembe living with Banyamulenge, they were also a target like us. So those are the Babembe who are not extremists because they could tell their fellow Babembe that, "what you are doing - attacking the Banyamulenge - is not good." So, when they fled from Uvira tensions started among those who were not extremists, because they feared that they could be attacked by their fellow Babembe for not following them or supporting their initiative of attacking Banyamulenge.

So actually, the atmosphere was good before the attack, because all of us there - no one could think that we could be attacked there, because we were in the hands of the Burundian government, we were being guarded by the Burundian army, and also we were in the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) refugee camp, so we were in the hand of the UN. No one could think that we could be attacked there. It was something that we didn't expect.

[2:26:00] ES: And then how did the atmosphere change after the attack?

DS/KC: What really happened after the attack - they took all of us Banyamulenge who were in that camp and they took us to a nearby primary school that was there. That's where we were hosted after the attack. And we were being guarded by the United Nations peacekeeper of Burundi - it was called ONUB (United Nations Operations in Burundi). So, we were being guarded by them at that school, so we could not go back to that refugee camp of Gatumba. The only thing we could do was move from the school where we were being hosted to a nearby town where we could go to buy things, but at that time we no longer went to the refugee camp. We only used to go to that nearby town, where we could do some shopping and do some other things.

Many of us were even scared to stay in that area, so many moved from Gatumba. They went to Bujumbura and other areas of Burundi. Others even moved - they didn't accept to go to the school where we were being hosted. They decided to go to the nearby towns so that they could find a place where they could stay in a safer area because everyone was scared.

[2:28:45] ES: And while you were living at that primary school right after the violence - what challenges did you face? How did you stay there? What was it like?

DS/KC: I was in that refugee camp where we attacked and many of us were killed, and also, I was in that school where we were being hosted. We stayed in that school for about two weeks, only. So, in those two weeks, I can say we were not in a good mood because everyone was traumatized by the events, we had experienced. Even was angry about the Burundian force and the UN, of not being able to protect us. So many people could come to that school to visit us, including the UN officials, the government officials, the European Union officials - there were so many international organizations and local organizations coming there to visit us.

[2:30:30] ES: When members of those international organizations or national organizations visited, what were those conversations like with them?

DS/KC: What they did is that they could come to ask us what we went through, how was it, the people who attacked us, what did you experience. Actually, it was kind of like asking us about our experience, and also, they could leave some assistance, because you know we were there without anything. We were there without shelter, no food, no clothes. Our basic needs were not fulfilled, so they could leave some assistance to us there. That's what they could do to us.

[2:31:53] ES: Did you have any friends or family who were directly affected or killed in the violence?

DS/KC: Yes, I have many. My first born - my son - was shot in the leg, but even though it was not as bad as others, and also, I lost the wife of my elder brother, the elder son of my elder brother, and also the grandchild of my elder brother was also killed in that attack, and also the daughter of that elder brother of mine was also shot, so you can see that we were directly affected. Also, I lost my aunt, the wife of my uncle, and we lost the daughter of my uncle, and the other two children were also killed that night. And obviously, we had that many friends who died there. The people we had been living with, the people we've been with them for so long. That night, we lost them.

So those are the people who are very close to me in my family, but if I could start saying people who died there, my friend, there are so many. Those are the people that we have lived together back in Katanga. We also lived together in Uvira. So, they are people that we have been with them for so many years. And also, we were with them in Gatumba that night. There are so many people. I have just mentioned the few who are in my close family.

[2:34:47] ES: In the eighteen years since you lost those members of your close family and the people you grew up with, how has your life been different because of the violence? What has stayed the same, and what has helped you to heal?

DS/KC: It is very hard to forget such a horrific time, because each and every time we remember it, the image of that night comes into our minds, so it's very hard to forget that. You know, even though it is very hard to forget that, it still you know, time keeps going, the intensity of the trauma that we had can tend to reduce a little bit. But still, there are so many things that keep reminding us of those horrific events, like the ongoing war, how our people - Banyamulenge - are being killed back home in the Haut Plateaus, and the attack. That is the same thing that happened to us. When we look at the hate speeches that are being broadcasted all over Congo by the politicians, and then our people are being attacked in the similar way we were attacked - so those are the things that keep on reminding us, those events. But again, I can say that the people that we lost, our loved ones that we lost, we buried them in our hearts. So even though we [?] -that night, still we try to heal, and whenever we are remembering them, we are doing the commemoration, that's when we start to bring back the image of what happened. But after all, you can't stay traumatic for eighteen years because you will eventually die of the trauma, so we tend to accept what happened so that our lives can continue.

[2:38:26] ES: How do you feel justice should be done, and has justice been delivered, and whose responsibility is it to bring justice?

DS/KC: What I can say - even though I'm not a lawyer or a practitioner in the law field - but what I think is that justice for all these years would have been given because we were killed in the eyes of the United Nations, we were killed in the eyes of the government, the people who killed us, who attacked us, they broadcasted it on the radio where everyone heard what they said. Agathon Rwasa - who is the leader of that rebellion group that attacked us - is still walking freely in Bujumbura. In fact, he is currently the leader of the party in Burundi, and he's working in the parliament, and he's the speaker of that rebellion group. He spoke it on the radio - everyone heard it - and all of them are still going freely. So, you can understand how the people who are supposed to give us justice are still silent about what happened to us, and up to date, the reason why you see the killings are still going on - they have not stopped - it's because even those who did it, none of them has been punished, by either the ICC (International Criminal Court), other courts, the international community, the Burundian government, the government of Congo. So, you can see that all those people who are responsible for bringing justice, are all silent and even watching this ongoing killing, which is still happening - it's the same as we were being attacked - so you can see how justice is being delayed, even though it happened on broad daylight so you can understand how it is.

And also, the other people I think that can do it, well, like you who are researchers. I think with all the information that you collect to make this research project; you can help us in one way or another by publishing your work where the international community can see it. The UN and other boards are in charge of bringing justice where they can see it and understand what happened so that those people can be arrested and justice be brought for our people who were killed that night.

[2:43:24] ES: Sir, those are all the questions I have. Is there anything you would like to add, or anything that I missed?

DS/KC: Agathon Rwasa - the leader of FNL (Forces Nationales de Libération) in Burundi - himself and the speaker of that movement, accepted that they were the ones responsible for the massacre. The bad thing is that Agathon Rwasa and his speaker are still walking freely, they are working in the government of Burundi and also you have seen how he has been working in the politics in Burundi, running for election - all that. That really shows that there is no justice. So, they are not the only people, because they are there in Burundi walking freely, but also in Congo, we can't say that Agathon and the speaker in their movement, are the only ones responsible for killing Banyamulenge. Because even in Congo we have so many of them who have done it, they are sharing their hate speeches against Banyamulenge. Some are working in Kinshasa; others are still working in eastern Congo. For example, let's take the person who announced in 1996 that Banyamulenges are given six days [?] - he's currently a minister in the province of South Kivu, his name

is Lwasi Ngabo Lwabanji. He's currently a provincial minister in South Kivu. He publicly announced that Banyamulenge were given six days ultimatum to leave Congo. That was in 1996. Now you can see how many years have passed, and you see, that person is working in the government, and no one comes to ask anything about him. He's not the only one - that is the same as those who are in Burundi. They are traveling all over the world, there is no arrest warrant to take them into court, so you can see how justice has been delayed.

So, the main reason I think that this massacre and killing are still going on, it's because no step has been taken, either by the government of Congo by the international community by the ICC by the UN - all of them are silent. For example, you can see the former minister in Congo by the name Justin [?]. He's a former minister, he has been broadcasting hate speeches all over Congo in Kinshasa, in South Kivu, in Northern Kivu, calling the other population to attack the Tutsi or the Banyamulenge who are in Congo. He's not the only one. There is another [?] who is currently and heavily calling other Congolese to come and massacre all the Banyamulenge and all the Tutsi or people of Rwandan origin who are in Congo. So, you can see the reason why they don't have fear of what they are doing. It's because nothing has been done for those who committed such crimes. That is the main reason that you see the killings are still going on.

The same thing is still happening. You have heard about the killing of Major Kaminzobe Joseph. He was an officer in the FARDC (?) - in the [Congolese] national army. A few months ago, he was taken by the people from the military convoy where he was with his inferior officers, like the inferior officer by the rank of colonel who was with him, they took from their hand, they killed him during the day, and after that, they lynched him and started eating his flesh. So that is the thing that was being broadcast all over the pictures were taken, the video and audio - so the evidence is there of the people who committed such crimes. But you can see nothing FARDC has done, nothing the government of Congo has done. Those are the things that are happening on Banyamulenge and no one is following to seek justice. And it's not the only - we have seen a recent one. The other one was also killed and lynched in Maniema in Kindu. He was lynched and they started eating his flesh. So, you can see the extent of the evil crimes that are being committed in Congo. The government is there, it can't do anything, and there are still many others who are going to die in the same way because nothing is being done.

[2:51:52] ES: When people lynch members of the Banyamulenge, why do they eat their flesh?

DS/KC: First of all, and the reason why I think they do is because I can take from what they said themselves. You can see that they have killed a Munyamulenge, and then they decided to eat his flesh after they have killed him - first of all, it's as a result of - I can say,

it's more of their lower IQ like, their intelligence - I don't know if I can explain it, how their mind works to reach the extent of killing an innocent person, and lynch him, and then eat his body, his flesh - it's unexplainable. But again, the other thing that they say themselves, they do that to show the people of Congo the hatred they have against Banyamulenge or other Tutsis to the extent that they decide to eat their flesh to show that they are highly determined to do what it shall take them to do to ensure that Banyamulenges are not in Congo, and also we can say that the reason they do it - because whenever they do it, they say it on social media saying that is a true sign of patriotism, for them. So, you can understand how such horrific massacres are happening all over Congo - and the people are just applauding them for doing that. Since the last lynching that they did in Kindu, it has very terrible, and the hate speeches have been broadcasted all over Congo, on social media, on radio, on TV, and in the community - but because of the international pressure, you can see that now the government of Congo is calling the people there to stop killing innocent people. But what they are doing it's not because they have mercy for what is happening to us or it's not because of the love they have for us, but instead, they fear that the international community is going to use such crimes against the current government of [President] Tshisekedi. But you can see that Tshisekedi and his government - they are now quoting the [?], of which if it is not done out of love, that is something that is going to continue because it is deep into their heart. So those are the things that they do, and those are things they do against us. Because of the coordinator of MONUSCO (The United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo) peacekeeping mission in Congo, has called on the government to stop such killings against Banyamulenge. I think that's why the regime of Tshisekedi is now trying to stop the people - which it's impossible because it has deep roots. So, what he's doing is stop them, and you have seen the international community - including the MONUSCO and the other embassy, like the ambassador of the US who is in Congo, Mike Hammer - those are the people who are calling the government to stop the massacre. But they are not doing it out of mercy or love. That is the same thing that happened, even to the original leaders like in the recent meeting that was here in Nairobi, president Tshisekedi was told by his fellow presidents of Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, and South Sudan - all of them they talked to him about what they are doing against the Tutsi, or against the people of Rwandan origin. I think that is the pressure now is having, because of the regional leaders and international leaders.

-end of interview-