Voices from the Rwanda Tribunal

Official Transcript: François Bembatoum (Part 1 of 6)
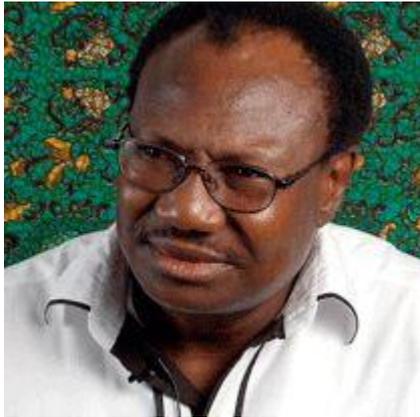
Role:	Chief Interpreter
Country of Origin:	Cameroon
Interview Date:	22 October 2008
Location:	Arusha, Tanzania
Interviewers:	Lisa P. Nathan
	John McKay
Videographer:	Max Andrews
Interpreter:	None

Interview Summary

François Bembatoum speaks to the challenges of translating testimonies at the ICTR, emphasizing the necessity to remain neutral when translating emotional or graphic material, and noting that important nuances described by witnesses can be easily lost in translation. He draws attention to the gradual desensitization of Tribunal staff to human suffering as a result of their work, advocating strongly for trained medical professionals to provide psychological support to Tribunal personnel, as well as to detainees and witnesses.

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Part 1

00:00   My name is François Bembatoum. I'm a Cameroonian citizen from Central African Sub-region and I work with ICTR as a Chief Interpreter. I coordinate interpretation services and I work mainly in court. You know we, we do the simultaneous translation or interpretation in court.

00:28   **Lisa P. Nathan: Thank you. Can you walk me through your timeline when you started at the ICTR? If you've had different roles, what those are, so beginning with when you first came here?**

00:40   I've always worked with ICTR as an interpreter. At, at first I was assigned to Kigali for about nine months. Then, the court hearings had not started. It was the investigation stage and therefore the majority of the people who were working with the judges, et cetera, were based in Kigali – I mean the investigators, the legal officers, et cetera, including the interpreters.

01:12   And then when the first initial appearances were scheduled I was transferred here with a couple of colleagues and since then I've been here in Arusha. So to answer your question, my role from the inception to today hasn't changed. It's communication, helping the parties to communicate in court. That's it.

01:39   **LPN: And can you say the year, the, the timeframe of the years?**

01:43   I came on board on the 16th of May, 1996, but I was transferred from Kigali to Arusha on the 1st of March, 1997. That's the time the first hearings started.

02:00   **LPN: Thank you. Can you tell me and describe to me where you were in the spring of 1994?**

02:08   Before 1994?

02:09   **LPN: In the spring of 1994.**

02:13   In 1994 I was, I was based in Senegal but I was working as a consultant with the United Nations and more specifically with the Economic Commission for Africa, based in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia. I was doing a lot of travelling across the African continent. And what I can remember very clearly is that on my way back home from an assignment, I believe in, somewhere in East Africa, my flight went through Kigali.

02:57   We had to stop over at the Kigali airport, Kanombe, and I noticed that there were many, many soldiers all over, I believe Belgian soldiers, and a week later the, the genocide started.

03:16   **LPN: So can you tell me about when you first started hearing about the events?**

03:22   I started hearing about the events – let's say I knew that Rwanda, to a certain extent, had been in a kind of permanent conflict, interethnic conflict, yeah, with several

repetitions over the years, et cetera. So I knew that Rwanda was involved in a war and was fighting people who were coming, coming from outside, from, from Uganda. I was far from imagining that the situation was, was that bad and it would lead to the, to massacres of the magnitude that we know today.

04:04   To me there was a kind of routine theme, thing, so it did not really, it was not something new. But when I went through Kanombe Airport that day – I guess it was end of March probably, end of March 1994 – and I saw the number of soldiers that were at the airport, it's then that I started suspecting that maybe the situation was a bit more serious than I thought, and a week later it was all over the media.