

Reflections on *Inkingi y'Ubuntu*, a Summit Fit for Heroes

At various times and situations, the 200 heroes who gathered in Bujumbura 16-18 April 2004 took the path of the minority, the path toward humanity, at risk to their own lives. These courageous people chose to save the lives of people they were expected or even ordered to harm. A 52-year-old man attending the festival works for the Ministry of the Interior. He remarked, "For me, this public recognition of heroes who saved lives symbolises that Burundi is moving forward and the war is almost over. Before this, many people like them were called traitors." Indeed, many have been called traitors to their ethnic groups and still today some are shunned by family and friends.

Search for Common Ground organised the Heroes Summit to honor these Burundians at a time when the prevailing image of Burundi, within the country and internationally, is one of ethnic tension and lingering violent conflict. The idea for the Summit came after several years' broadcast of a weekly radio programme by SFCG's Studio Ijambo that highlights the stories of Burundians who, during moments of extreme crisis and violence, took great risks to save people of a different ethnic group. Since September 1999, Studio Ijambo has produced "Inkingi y'Ubuntu", which in Kirundi means "Pillars of Humanity" or "Heroes." These heroes are ordinary people who demonstrated extraordinary courage and humanity during very difficult moments in Burundi's history.

Somewhat unexpectedly, I was able to travel to Burundi to attend the Heroes Summit as a proud representative of the Washington, DC office. Having never been to Burundi, I was not sure how much of the Summit and its accompanying emotions and reactions I would understand, especially as I had heard that Burundians tend to be more reserved than the West Africans with whom I am most familiar. After three long days of activities surrounding the Summit, however, I think I was able to discern quite a lot of emotion among participants. Facilitating this was the fact that the Summit seemed to be a forum where everyone, even the most reticent Burundians, was inclined to reach deep inside themselves and find the courage to share openly their common human experience. The premise that all participants were to be honored for amazing actions they had already taken meant the heroes were not pressured to prove anything to anyone.



An atmosphere of enthusiasm prevailed throughout the Summit that was maybe by the end tinged with a hint of exhaustion for those who came from tiny villages far from the capital. While it makes perfect sense, I was surprised to learn that part of the logistical planning for the Summit included finding clothing and shoes for those lacking monetary means to supply their own. For many, the opportunity to travel to the capital city and intermingle with Burundians from around the country as well as people from other countries was itself incredible. A woman from Karuzi province in Burundi's northeast commented that, "We who live far away, we did not know this place. Now that I am here and see the capital, I want to plead with the politicians to look for lasting justice in Burundi." This woman's comment seemed quite representative of many heroes present. I think many heroes went home with a growing sense of

entitlement; not to personal power or wealth, but to a newfound understanding that just as they belong to Burundi, Burundi also belongs to them. They have the right to expect fairness and abhor corruption from politicians. A woman named Remi from Rutana province in southeastern Burundi declared she had learned that she “can be powerful for peace all the time” and that her acts of peace can be repeated. Indeed, these heroes can use heroic deeds they have performed as momentum to continue to be leaders toward peace and justice in their communities – and they can act everyday to support others in taking similar action.

In addition to recognising the potential leadership role of these ordinary Burundians who demonstrated laudable behavior during times of crisis, SFCG also hoped to transform the way these people are seen in their communities – not as traitors but as people who deserve respect. At the end of the Summit, a hero received a telephone call from a fellow community member known to be someone who killed during the crisis. The man called to congratulate the hero, as he had heard about the Summit on the radio. He told the hero that he knew what he had done to save people, but never thought he would be honored in such a way. The idea of commending those who have saved and protected in Burundi is something in great need of being expanded and made more common. People need to become aware that they, as individuals, have a choice between violence and peace and that peace can even come with benefits. Our overall effectiveness in achieving such a change in perception will be difficult to measure and will take time to determine. The SFCG team in Burundi is committed to following up on this, however, and will share results as they become available.



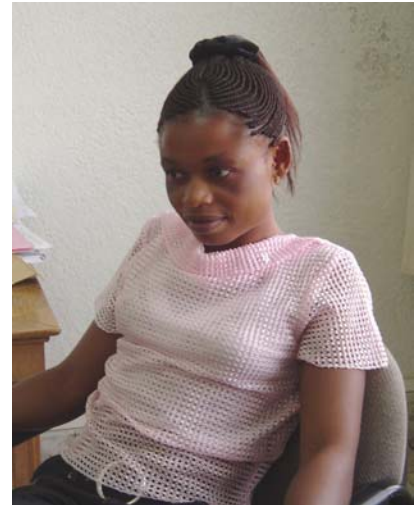
During the Summit, the Burundian heroes, along with 10 like-minded people from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Nigeria, spent the first two days together participating in conflict resolution workshops, envisioning a peaceful Burundi, and sharing moving stories of courage and sacrifice, such as those mentioned below. At times the experience was bittersweet, as each act of heroism had to be placed in the context of hatred, violent conflict, and revenge.

In the blind cycle of violence characterizing Burundi’s crisis during past decades, no one was safe. As Tutsis were looking to avenge their murdered friends and family members, a Tutsi woman from Ijenda, in the mountains outside of Bujumbura, decided revenge was not the way for her. She hid 41 Hutu neighbours in her house and, along with her husband, a military officer, defended their compound at night from attackers armed with machetes and spears. She also risked her life to protect her neighbours’ property and cattle. During the day, she would send her children out with the Hutus in search of food in the hills close by, returning by nightfall. She explains her family’s courage: “I did this because I’m convinced that human life is sacred, and that no one would have benefited from the death of my neighbors. I did not protect them because I am a Tutsi or a Hutu, I did it because morality obliges me to act. We should not put forward our own ethnic group, but rather our humanity. We are created by the same God. We are the same people.”

Not only were stories shared through the power of words, but also through drama. A woman from Muramvya province, just east of Bujumbura, recounted her experience during a plenary session in which the Tubiyage theatre troupe performed heroes' stories. The woman, a Hutu, told how she gathered Tutsi

neighbours in a field and hid them under tree branches as a Hutu militia approached. Once the militia departed, she convinced her younger brother to accompany her neighbours to safety at an army outpost controlled by the Tutsi military. Unfortunately, they encountered an angry mob of Tutsis who killed her brother because he was Hutu. The woman has since been ostracised by her sisters, who accuse her of being a traitor. In tears after the performance, the woman commented on the power of seeing her story told through drama. She said the troupe reflected exactly her multitude of emotions during those trying few days. The woman also said that she always believed in her heart that what she did was right, and that participating in the Heroes Summit made her finally feel recognised in a positive way.

A 20-year-old Congolese woman named Francine from Bunia, of the Lendu ethnic group, shared with me her story. In 2001 she tried desperately to save the life of a friend of the Hema ethnicity and her three siblings when she learned of plans to burn down their house with them inside. Hema were being targeted by Lendu acts of vengeance. She alerted her friend to the horrific news and took them to the house of a pastor's wife, who reluctantly agreed to take them into hiding. She then went to her friend's house and snuck out all the important possessions she could in a suitcase and hid it under her own clothes at home. Francine had to do everything she could to not let people know she had helped her friends or she herself would have become a target. Then, after three days of intense fear and worry, there was a chance for her friends to escape. They fled by airplane to Goma and still live there today. When I asked Francine what she thinks can happen to change the current mentality of tribalism and spiral of killings, she commented that "maybe jobs can help because people have no way to survive, but at the very least what is needed is an infusion of alternative ideas" that will give people the power of choice.



The third day marked a public celebration in the heroes' honor, and was attended by the Vice President, the UN Deputy Special Representative for Burundi, the Minister of Peace Mobilisation and National Reconciliation, the Mayor of Bujumbura, and others. During his remarks, the UN Representative Ambassador Satti declared to the heroes, "Your acts were proof of humanity in Burundi. They are indicative of the new Burundian society; a society of solidarity, fraternity, and love."

Cultural performances brought the celebration to life and included drumming; dance; acrobatics; the singing of an original song created for the Summit; the distribution of gifts to the heroes - radios and fabric; and the crowd-pumping musical finale by Burundian star Kidumu. Hundreds of people, in addition to those under tent cover, stood in the blazing sun throughout the day to participate in the festivities. Most were young men, but there were also families with children, women, and middle-aged people.

Eugene Buhinta, a 23-year-old student from Bujumbura, reflected that, "We the young, we will live on now having seen these examples of such courageous people...and that can give us hope for a better future." A 14-year-old girl from Bujumbura similarly said, "My hope for the future is that this message is

spread widely so others can act in the same way." As Radio Isanganiro provided live broadcast throughout the day and the national television station covered the story on its news programme, hopefully her wish was achieved.

The dignitaries present at the public celebration were not the only V.I.P.s thinking about the Burundian heroes that day. Ziggy Marley, son of Bob Marley, prepared a video address for the Burundian people wishing them peace. The video clip was played on the national television station in the days leading up to the Summit, and young members of the crowd attending the Summit shared that it was exciting and special to hear Ziggy's message and to know he cares about the people of Burundi.



The heroes spoke frequently about the need to continue working toward peace and to encourage others to do the same. In their eyes, the Summit should not be a stand-alone event in Burundi's history. SFCG in Burundi is committed to continuing to work with these heroes and others toward a Burundian society that fully values acts of peace, where everyday people are leaders in their own right and political leaders look to them for ideas and guidance.