

Africa Report by Linda de Hoyos

An event of 'extreme gravity'

The arrest of Bishop Augustin Misago has brought to the fore a philosophical conflict between the RPF and the Vatican.

Speaking from Vatican City on April 21, Pope John Paul II said that in the context of the ongoing war in Kosovo, "Today I would like to remember the many 'forgotten wars' of Africa, from Angola to the Great Lakes, from Congo-Brazzaville to Sierra Leone, from Guinea-Bissau to the Democratic Republic of Congo, from the Horn of Africa to Sudan. It is a long and bitter succession of internal and external conflicts, which mainly affect the innocent populations, devastating the life of the Catholic communities."

The Pope noted "in particular the widespread sentiment of pain and sorrow on receiving the news of the arrest of Bishop Augustin Misago of Gikongoro, Rwanda."

The Bishop was arrested on April 15, one week after Rwandan President Pasteur Bizimungu threw out a challenge in a speech: "Will the Catholic Church continue to ignore accusations by Christians of the Church against Bishop Misago, accusations which continue to grow in number? Will Bishop Misago himself continue to ignore the calls? The Rwandan state did not place Bishop Misago above the law and is not afraid of him. We had wanted to give him and the Catholic Church time to accept responsibility for the issue. We shall only intervene if the Church continues to do nothing."

Bishop Misago was charged with genocide and crimes against humanity. Bail has been denied. The Bishop is the highest-ranking official of the Church to be arrested; 19 priests are currently in Rwandan jails on similar charges, but none has come to trial so far.

According to the Rwandan gov-

ernment news agency, Bishop Misago refused to give shelter to Tutsis trying to escape death during the April 1994 bloodletting that was unleashed in the aftermath of the assassination of Rwanda's Hutu President, Juvénal Habyarimana.

The Vatican called the Bishop's incarceration an event of "extreme gravity." When President Bizimungu later in the week traveled to Burundi, its Catholic bishops and the Papal Nuncio to Burundi refused to meet him. In general, the Catholic Church has "taken care of its own" in various cases where Hutu priests were suspected of complicity in the retributive murder of Tutsis in the spring-summer 1994.

The arrest of Bishop Misago takes place in the context of an ongoing campaign launched by the Rwandan Patriotic Front government against the Catholic Church in Rwanda. The roots of the RPF and its leaders, beginning with Defense Minister Paul Kagame, are in the Tutsi elite who were the titular rulers of the country during the Belgian colonial administration. In 1959, on the eve of independence, the Catholic Church in Rwanda assisted the revolution of the Mouvement Démocratique Républicain, Parti du Mouvement de l'Emancipation Hutu, led by Grégoire Kayibanda, who was himself married to a Tutsi.

After the downfall of the Tutsi monarchy, many of the Tutsi ruling strata fled Rwanda, many finding refuge in Uganda. It is this refugee grouping in particular that forms the leadership of the RPF. Although President Pasteur Bizimungu is a Hutu, he has led the public campaign to force retribu-

utive justice on those who led the 1959 revolution.

As it was coming to power in 1994, the RPF manifested its direct enmity to the Church. On June 5, 1994, the RPF killed the Archbishop of Kigali, Msgr. Vincent Nsengiyumva, along with Bishops Thaddée Nsengiyumva and Joseph Ruzindana, and Msgr. Innocent Gasabwoya. During the months from April to July 1994, when the RPF assumed total power in Kigali, 94 Catholic priests, and 100 religious lost their lives in the bloodletting by both sides in the Rwandan civil war.

The arrest of Bishop Misago and the conflict that has arisen between the Vatican and the RPF regime raises the most crucial issues facing Rwandans of all communities, both inside Rwanda and in the diaspora:

Will there be democratic rule in Rwanda, in which each individual, whether Tutsi, Hutu, or Twa, is recognized as sacred, by virtue of being created in the image of God, or will Rwanda revert to the feudalistic and oligarchical rule that characterized it before 1959, which was encouraged by the Belgian colonialists? What is the truth of the bloodletting that occurred in Rwanda in 1994 and thereafter? Does the RPF have the only view of the truth? How will justice best be served for the terrible mass killing that has taken place in Rwanda since 1990, when the RPF first invaded Rwanda from Uganda?

The Pope had ended his statement of April 21 by imploring for Christians to convince those who continue to opt for hatred and violence to instead "opt for sincere and patient dialogue that will lead to beneficial solutions for all. We must implore Jesus Christ so that peace and fraternity become a consoling reality throughout the African continent." But that does not appear to be the option taken by the RPF government at this time.