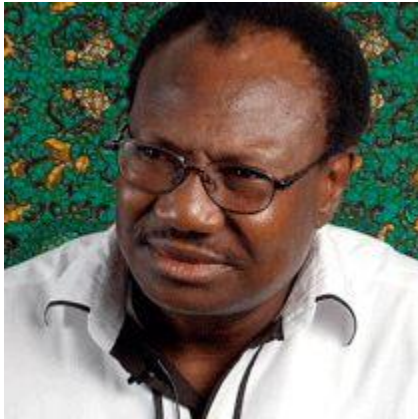


Voices from the Rwanda Tribunal

Official Transcript: François Bembatoum (Full Interview)



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.

The transcript of the interview begins on the following page.

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.

Part 2

00:00 **LPN: Can you tell me the story, describe to me how you first came to work with the ICTR?**

00:09 Now, the-, there's, there's a personal element there that I would not want to, to mention. As I told you I was working as a, as a freelance interpreter and therefore that involved, you know a lot of travelling, and because something happened in my family and I had children, young children, I had no choice but stop travelling. I had a friend who was working as a personnel officer with UNAMIR in Kigali then and one day he called me.

00:55 I was – I had gone back to Cameroon then. He called me and asked me whether I would be interested in a permanent job with ICTR. And yeah, I said yes. So that's how I accepted the job.

01:13 **LPN: What did you know – do you remember what you knew about the ICTR at that time?**

01:18 I knew that the Security Council and the General Assembly had decided to set up a tribunal to try those who were responsible for, for the genocide, but when I received that call I should confess that the information that I had about the ICTR was really scanty. But from that day on I started reading a bit more about ICTR. Yeah, that's it.

01:50 **LPN: Can you describe what it was like for you when you first arrived in Kigali?**

01:56 Now, do you mean the social atmosphere or . . . ?

02:00 **LPN: What, what comes to mind for you both, I think, socially and working?**

02:09 Now, socially it wasn't easy. The first contact was, was quite frightening because when my aircraft landed there were military people heavily, heavily armed all over the airport and, and they were not friendly at all, they were not friendly. They wouldn't talk, but you could see through their eyes that, that they were not very friendly.

02:44 And then when I went through the immigration formalities a friend came to pick me, and as we were driving towards the town I could see signs of fighting and, and, and

killings, you know, along the road. And my friend was giving me, was explaining to me what happened at Kanombe Airport, around Kanombe Airport and along the road, you know, as we were going, we were going to town. The, the first contact was not very exciting socially and i-, it remained like that for all the nine months that I spent in Kigali.

03:36 Now professionally it was, I was thrilled because I thought, “Well, I’m going to contribute to international justice.” Yeah. Of course I was not a judge, I was not a, I was not a legal officer, okay, but I thought that by helping the parties communicate in court, I mean, yeah, I mean that role was, was worthwhile. And then with time when I came to understand the other factors that I was not in a position to, to pinpoint then, the thrill started fading out.

04:35 The-, there are too many non-legal, non-judicial interferences, you know, in the general functioning of, of ICTR and that may have, to a certain extent, diverted the institution from its, its objective.

04:59 **LPN: Can you be any more specific to . . . ?**

05:03 I mean political interferences, government interference. I wouldn’t want to mention any country but I-, I’m sure you have an idea. They attempt, for instance, to push the judges to try a certain category, you know of, of suspects and not some others, okay, trying to orientate the investigation, (___), the investigations of the Office of the Prosecutor in a given direction and, and putting obstacles, you know, when the prosecutor wanted to also investigate the opposite side, side, you know, of the events, et cetera.

05:52 And then the quality of the witnesses. The majority of the, of the prosecution witnesses come from the country where the genocide took place and those witnesses are not free people. Not free judiciary, becau-, becau-, judicially because the majority of them are prisoners and they are in prison because whether they were tried or not, that’s not important but they were in prison in connection with the genocide, okay, and those who were not in prison were definitely not f-, free to talk, okay.

06:38 So from that point of view there, there, there’s a very, very strong influence, you know from the, from the Rwandan government and, and some associations linked to the government in, in Rwanda which is, which is unfortunate. It politicized, you know, the whole thing.

Part 3

00:00 **LPN: So as you look back at – you’ve, you’ve been at the ICTR for a long time and you’ve seen a lot. Before I ask you any more questions I want you to have the opportunity to tell me, to tell the future anything – any reflection that you have, an experience that you’ve had that you would like to share about your time here.**

00:27 Yeah. After, after 12 years with ICTR of course I mean I came to a number of conclusions. The first conclusion is that human beings can behave worse than animals. I

was privileged to be in court listening to the victims telling the judges their story, et cetera, and I came to the conclusion that animals do not do that to their victims, you know. So from that point of view, man is most probably the worst beast that you can think of.

01:12 Another experience that I went through and which I will probably live with for the rest of my life is the, the trauma, the trauma that I went through. You are human being, you are not, you are not, you are n-, you may not be directly involved, okay, but you are a human being with a sensitivity, you have a family, children, et cetera.

01:43 When a witness is there facing you or rather facing the judges and telling his or her story, the horrors that she or he went through, or his or her relatives went through – inevitably there is this phenomenon of identification. You know, you identify, you know, with the victim, you know. And you feel it deep inside you, and you dream about it, you know, in your sleep not once, not twice, you know, it goes and comes. Okay.

02:22 Now the third thing that I want to, to say is that I think working with the tribunal for so many years and listening to all those horrors sort of dehumanized me. My sensitivity to human suffering sort of diminished. Yeah.

02:45 I remember telling some of my new colleagues that came on board – I used to tell them, “You are going to hear terrible things in court, but the day you walk out of court and you are able to crack a joke or to laugh aloud it means that you’re already changing. It means that you have become less sensitive to human suffering.” And this is something I think that my, my, my nature is no longer the same. I’m, I’m a different person.

03:26 **LPN: So you said that you used to tell your colleagues – new colleagues this. Do you still tell them that?**

03:33 Yes. I still tell them, yes. And they went through the experience themselves and later on I mean we, we discuss – we do discuss it, you know, from time to time actually. We do, yes.

03:46 **LPN: And do you think that helps you as a human being?**

03:51 Talking about it certainly helps but a lot more could have been done in terms of, in terms of assistance. I, I remember, I remember there, there was one lady, a psychiatrist that had come to see me in my office and, and she was looking for a job in our section, which is basically language section and language support. I told her, “Listen there, there’s nothing I can do to help you get a job in this section, however there is a lot of work for you out there.”

04:37 And I had in mind places like UNDF, I mean with the detainees; the witnesses, the majority of who are victims or relatives to some of the victims. They were eyewitnesses in genocides, they were, they were involved, they were, they could have become

victims and therefore they went through the whole trauma. They needed some psychiatric counseling, call it what you want.

- 05:16 And she told me, “But how do I go about mentioning it to the, to the top management?” I said, “Okay, sit down, write something, sit down.” So she sat down and we, we started writing something.
- 05:32 You know, there are some professional groups that run the risk of trauma because they operate in court. Of course the parties, but that is their job, I guess they are used to it. But how about the security officers, how about the, the registry officers, the language support services staff?
- 06:00 You know, we are not used to that; the judges probably in their – when they were younger or in their past professions, you know, had an opportunity to hear about such things. It was not my case and it was not the case of the majority of my colleague interpreters, you see.
- 06:23 So she wrote the letter and took it to the then registrar and she got the job. She got the job but only for the detainees in the, in the UNDF, not even for the witnesses, leave alone for the staff, because the registrar then was of the opinion that we did not need any counseling.
- 06:51 And then much later, I think it was last year or the year before there was one session. Ever. For the 12 years that I’ve, I’ve been here in ICTR there was only one counseling session about trauma and yet this is something that should have been done again and again, right from the word go.
- 07:18 How about the investigations that go out on the field and participates in digging of bodies, identifying them, taking pieces of clothes, removing pieces of clothes on the bodies in order to build the evidence, et cetera? They don’t need counseling? Nobody thought it was necessary.

Part 4

- 00:00 **LPN: So if you were talking to somebody who had – if there were to be another unfortunately, it’s quite likely that there will be another tribunal of this nature in the future and there will be a need for people in your role, other interpreters, w-, what support would you like there to be for them?**
- 00:25 There’s a job that needs to be done and it cannot be done without the interpreters and therefore the interpreters have their role to play. I believe that there is a preparatory, preparation that needs, a thorough preparation that needs to be done with the contribution of psychiatrists, psychologists, sociologists, historians, et cetera.
- 00:57 I came to the ICTR, I knew that there were killings but I was far from suspecting that it was that gruesome. I discovered it through my readings, through testimonies in court, et cetera, and there was nobody to help, nobody. So th-, this is one thing, one thing

that I believe would, would, would be extremely necessary. Now I, I, I can't, sitting here, I can't tell you more about what would need to be done but, but the preparation is definitely something, something very important.

- 01:42 **LPN: So when you first came to work here I imagine you had some idea of what justice meant to you. Has that changed? What would you say – what do you think about justice? I know you're not a, a legal advisor or a lawyer, but you are a human being, you are familiar with the idea of justice, and what does that mean to you?**
- 02:08 I touched on that topic slightly without going into details earlier on. My idea of justice is independence. I'm not too sure this tribunal is independent. That sums it all.
- 02:26 **LPN: Okay. Thank you. So I'm now going to turn to my colleague, John McKay.**
- 02:32 **John McKay: I think, I think we're good.**
- 02:34 **LPN: Yeah? Y- . . .**
- 02:35 **JM: I wo-, I would just ask him what languages he has used in the past, (_____).**
- 02:42 **LPN: Okay. So, yes . . .**
- 02:44 **JM: Yeah.**
- 02:44 **LPN: Yeah, okay. So I will take – you're a very powerful speaker, sir. Thank you.**
- 02:53 **JM: (_____).**
- 02:53 **LPN: I . . . so I would like to ask you a f-, just a few more questions particular to your role. So if . . . are we still . . . okay. So could you describe to me, almost you could even pick a day from court, a, a time and, and tell me a bit about what you do when you are in your role as interpreter in the courtroom?**
- 03:21 W-, when I enter my booth I'm, I'm, I-, I'm nervous, I'm tense for several reasons. The first reason is, "Now what horrors I'm going to hear again today?" because I know that they will disturb me later.
- 3:43 The second thing is – a witness will come and tell his or her story. Will I as a professional be able to give a faithful rendition of what the witness would say, (___), including the nuances and if possible, if possible putting through the feeling that, that, that, the, the, the witness mi-, might have, okay? The fear, the, the, he, he, he can, he may have rebelled for instance, you know, he, he . . .
- 04:28 So many feelings that you can perceive, but how do you put it through to the judges? You see. While you might say the witness is sitting right there facing the judges and that the judges, you know, can see his demeanor, et cetera, but those who are there listening to the voice of the interpreter, as a professional I'm supposed to be . . . okay.

- 05:04 If the witness breaks into tears I'm not supposed to break into tears, I'm supposed to be neutral, and that is a source of major, major frustration, especially when you identify, you know with the witness. (___).
- 05:28 Being able – or at the end, you know when you step out and then you start wondering, “Did I, did I use the right words? Did I, have I watered down a bit what the witness said? Have I exaggerated? Is that going to influence, you know, those who are supposed to assess the evidence, et cetera, et cetera?”
- 05:53 There's a certain degree, a certain degree of, of, how do I put it, difference, you know in the wording, in the, the, the vocab, the terminology especially when we are working in three languages. The witness is speaking Kinyarwanda. I don't understand Kinyarwanda.
- 06:28 There's a Kinyarwanda booth there that translates from Kinyarwanda into Fren-, into English and I pick it up, you know, into French. In the process some, there's a loss, there's a loss, especially when the witness speaks fast and the emotion, et cetera, okay. Those are from the professional point of view some details that, that are frustrating, really frustrating.
- 07:03 But I'm, I'm sure I personally and I'm convinced all my colleagues, you know, we've been trying our best, you know, to convey a faithful message and that, and, and from that point of view we did assist, let's say carry forward the cause of justice. I could have probably be better if we, as I said, did not have those interferences that had nothing to do with justice.

Part 5

- 00:00 **LPN: So if you, well, you do, you have the opportunity here to speak to the future, to people from around the world including Rwandans – is there anything that you would like to say about your, your role here, about the, the job of the interpreter?**
- 00:25 What could I tell the rest of the world, (___), the Rwandans about my job as such? I, because of my job, I find myself part and parcel of, of, of a global system and, and without my role the system would not, would not operate normally, so I would encourage Rwandans, you know, to, to get, to get more and more involved in, in such a profession, to specialize because, because they will need it, they will need it in Rwanda.
- 01:09 What happened in Rwanda, I don't think a foreigner, I don't think a foreigner can really, on his own, go deep into it in order to understand what, what went wrong and when. And it's all the more so as when you're discussing, you know, with, wi-, with your Rwandan colleagues or, or, or friends. It is extremely difficult to bring them to tell you, to pinpoint, you know, w-, what went wrong, how did it happen.
- 01:58 Some people would si-, simply refuse to discuss it. They would say, “We are not supposed to discuss our personal matters you know with, with foreigners.” Which

makes it all the more difficult for the interpreter that I am, you know, to understand and therefore be in a better position to convey the message.

- 02:19 **LPN: I imagine that because you are in charge of interpretation that you have some Rwandans who work for you. Are there particular challenges in, in overseeing their work?**
- 02:38 Yes. Yes, because one, I don't understand their language and therefore I'm not in a position to assess the quality of their interpretation. I can simply infer from the answers of the witness or the questions of the witnesses that the message is going through, okay.
- 03:11 The second difficulty is that it's not really with, with, with me but it is, it is with my Kinyarwanda-speaking colleagues. As I said before, many of them went through the genocide experience and are traumatized to a certain degree, and therefore knowing that they are in court hearing, not only hearing witnesses telling the judges what the interpreters themselves went through. And the interpreters have to translate that.
- 04:00 Not only what you are hearing is traumatizing for you, okay, but it is your duty, you know to, to repeat it, et cetera. I, I think that there they suffer a double trauma, double trauma. So w-, when I'm assigning them to court I have to be very careful because depending on the nature of the evidence I have to be very careful who I assign to trial X, Y, or Z.
- 04:39 I give you an example. I have Kinyarwanda-speaking colleagues that are ladies and you know that there are many detainees here who are being tried for sexual assault or, how do you call it again, rape. I always make sure I don't (___), let me say, for specific reasons I, I avoid assigning women to cases where the detainees are being tried for sexual assault and rape. I don't assign my female colleagues to such cases as much as possible for obvious reasons, (___).
- 05:46 I even received a specific requests from some of them that they would not want to service this case or that other case either because of the reason that I just gave you, or because the events that, which are being tried in that specific case happen in their, on their hills or their village of origin. That's the difficulty I'm having with my Kinyarwanda-speaking colleagues.

Part 6

- 00:00 **LPN: John, do you have anything else?**
- 00:02 **JM: No, this has been fantastic.**
- 00:03 **Max Andrews: I have one.**
- 00:05 **LPN: Okay. Max has a question that he would like me to ask you and I hope I word it well, but you can . . . So it has to do with, do you, and I might change it around a bit because of your, some of your answers earlier.**

- 00:22 **LPN: It has to do with hope for the future, hope for the human race and your thoughts on that, given some of your answers earlier about humanity being worse than animals. But you're still here, you're still participating, you still laugh and have relationships, beautiful relationships with human beings here. So what are your thoughts on the future and hope for the humanity?**
- 00:56 Unfortunately, y-, I, I believe that humanity hasn't, hasn't learned lessons, you know at least from the genocide that occurred in Rwanda. I mean look at the world today. (___), how many wars are going on, unabated? And there is no, there is no really serious sign that the trend is going to change any, any time soon.
- 01:32 So I don't know. The, the, the whole thing sounds like the world or hu-, humanity needs a war somewhere. Humanity needs people to be dying somewhere, violent deaths somewhere for it to feel that it exists. And that is, that is – this is a terrible thing, a terrible conclusion to come to.
- 02:10 I don't know whether you have children, but I do have children. I would want them to live in a better world where there would be more peace, you know. Where people would be talking, where there's – nobody will decide to wage war because he or she believes that he's superior culturally or, or his or her civilizatio-, civilization is, is, is better and superior to the civilization of the one next door.
- 02:43 The genocide in Rwanda is, is – fits perfectly in the scenario that has been on for quite a, quite a number of years. What is going to save humanity? I don't know, I don't know. Spending 12 years here in this tribunal maybe helped me grow more aware, you know of the tragedy, but it is a continuous tragedy in more and more countries.
- 03:19 It's, it's, it's, in Rwanda it was a, it was a genocide, fine. In some other countries (___) it is, it is open war. The common factor is that people die. Human beings killing other human beings sometimes for reasons that are flimsy, for misunderstandings that could have been solved quite easily through dialogue, but I don't know. I'm, I'm very pessimistic about the future of humanity, if you want to know my conclusion.
- 04:06 **LPN: I do. Do you have anything else that you would like to say or share with us?**
- 04:13 No. I, I think that I've gone, I've gone deep enough, you know into certain things that have been kept inside me. It definitely helped me voicing them out. I, I hope, I, I hope that by the time I leave this place not long from now, at least that's according to my plans, I hope that I, I will not suffer too much from, from the trauma, but definitely I'm not optimistic about the future of humanity. I hope I'm wrong.