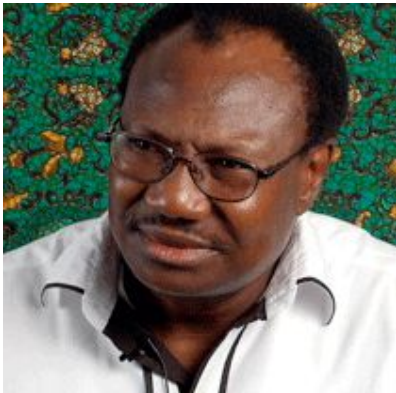




Voices from the Rwanda Tribunal

Official Transcript: François Bembatoum (Part 2 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.

The transcript of Part 2 begins on the following page.

Part 2

- 00:00 **Lisa P. Nathan: 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.