

Rwanda bishop faces death penalty in genocide trial

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KIGALI (Reuters) – A Roman Catholic bishop on trial for genocide and crimes against humanity faces a possible death sentence when a Rwandan criminal court pronounces its verdict Thursday.

The case of Bishop Augustin Misago, who has been held at Kigali Central Prison for over a year, has attracted the attention of the pope and other senior Vatican officials.

Misago, an ethnic Hutu, is charged with helping to plan Rwanda's 1994 genocide, but is not accused of carrying out any murders.

Ethnic Hutu extremists massacred around 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus in three months of ethnic violence which ended only when a rebel army led by the country's current president seized power in July 1994.

Misago has consistently maintained his innocence, saying he attended high-level meetings during the genocide only to appeal for calm.

He says he is the victim of a political campaign against the church spurred by senior government officials, and has received support from Pope John Paul II.

After months of hearings and delays, the Nyamirambo court in Kigali will decide Misago's fate Thursday.

"The court will pronounce their final judgement tomorrow," said Emmanuel Rukangira, chief advocate of Rwanda's Supreme Court, who took up the Misago case last year as a prosecutor in Kigali. "All final arguments have already been made."

In 1994 Misago was the bishop of Gikongoro, a prefecture in southern Rwanda, and prosecutors say he not only helped plan the genocide in the area but also refused to shelter Tutsis who came to him for help.

He is also accused of sending away dozens of schoolchildren in what at first appeared to be a rescue mission, only to allow them to fall into the hands of Hutu murderers later.

He was arrested in April 1999 and his trial began last August. It has frequently been adjourned because of complaints by Misago's lawyers that the bishop suffers from high blood pressure and needs medical attention.

The Catholic church has been bitterly criticized by genocide survivors and

human rights groups for its silence during the slaughter and its failure to apologize afterwards.

But senior church figures in Rome closed ranks Wednesday in support of Misago.

Fides, the news agency of the Vatican's missionary arm, said in a special issue Wednesday that he had been "unjustly detained." The agency published testimonials in favor of Misago from leading cardinals and archbishops.

Last month, the pope, who visited Rwanda in 1990, sent a telegram of solidarity to Misago, saying he prayed for him to be freed soon.

In his response, Misago told the pope that a death penalty for him would be "totally unfair and unfounded."

Fides, which plans to publish a dossier showing Misago's innocence Thursday, said bishops across the world were praying for Misago.

If found guilty, Misago faces the maximum sentence of death.

Since Rwanda began its genocide trials in 1996, over 2,500 suspects have been tried and more than 300 sentenced to death. Twenty-two were executed by firing squad in 1998.

More than 100,000 genocide suspects are still awaiting trial in the central African country's overcrowded prisons.