

Witness boycott brings Rwandan genocide trials to a halt

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Trials at the international Rwandan genocide tribunal have ground to a halt because witnesses are refusing to travel from Rwanda to give evidence at the hearings in Arusha, Tanzania, and the tribunal and the government in Kigali are locked in a bitter dispute.

The trial of a former cabinet minister, Eliezer Niyitegeka, who is alleged to have personally ordered the murder of dozens of children, is on hold and other cases have been hit.

The boycott threatens to upset the opening of one of the most important trials, that of Theoneste Bagosora, the alleged mastermind of the genocide.

Last week Rwanda's chief prosecutor, Gerald Gahima, bitterly criticised the so badly run that justice was not being served.

But the tribunal's chief prosecutor, Carla del Ponte, has told the UN security council that the Rwandan

government is manufacturing reasons to block cooperation with the court, after her announcement that she will investigate the country's present leaders for alleged war crimes.

She accuses Rwanda of organising the boycott to discredit the court.

Mrs Del Ponte has already indicted one officer in the Rwandan Patriotic Front, which overthrew the Hutu regime that oversaw the genocide, for crimes against humanity.

The officer has not been publicly named.

Mr Gahima, speaking at the UN in New York, accused the tribunal of taking years to bring the perpetrators of the 1994 genocide, in which about 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were murdered, to justice, even though most of the cabinet of the time is in custody.

So far the tribunal has convicted eight people of genocide or crimes against humanity. But, despite a

budget of \$100m and 800 staff, the court has taken years to bring dozens of others to trial. Colonel Bagosora has been in custody for six years.

Rwanda's prosecutor also accused the tribunal of failing to protect witnesses, which is why, he said, they were refusing to travel to the court.

"We have come to a point where we feel that the international community does not actually care about justice for Rwanda and we can give many examples of the neglect and the indifference of the tribunal," he said.

Mrs De Ponte said: "Despite assurances given by President (Paul) Kagame to the prosecutor in the

past, no concrete assistance has been provided in response to repeated requests regarding these investigations."

Mr Gahima said that the government opposed the prosecution of members of the RPF, which forms the core of today's Rwandan army, because it would undermine an institution that held the country together and continued to defend it from Hutu extremists.

Tribunal officials have told the Rwandan government that some of those who led the genocide may escape conviction if prosecutors cannot present enough witnesses.