

Christian Journalist Accused of Plot Against Rwandan Government

A Rwandan singer known for his renditions of the national anthem and three others appeared in the Rwandan High Court on Friday charged with conspiring against the government.

Singer Kizito Mihigo, radio journalist Cassien Ntamuhanga, retired soldier Jean Paul Dukuzumuremyi and Agnes Niyibizi, an accountant, appeared in court clad in the pink outfits worn by detainees.

The case has drawn wide public interest because of Mihigo's popularity as a performer. It has also prompted criticism from rights group Reporters Without Borders, who have expressed concern about press freedom over the arrest of a journalist and others.

President Paul Kagame and government officials have often talked of plots against the state in the past year, sometimes blaming former top security officers linked to the South Africa-based opposition group, the Rwanda National Congress.

Mihigo and Ntamuhanga, a journalist for Rwanda's Amazing Christian Radio, were accused by the prosecution of plotting with the Congress via Skype and WhatsApp. The prosecution said conversations took place earlier this year.

Former soldier Dukuzumuremyi was allegedly given money to carry out grenade attacks in Kigali, while Niyibizi is accused of facilitating a cash transfer to him, the prosecution said.

"Our position is that he (Mihigo) is innocent," Mihigo's lawyer John Bigarama told Reuters.

The defendants, detained in April, are charged with an offense

against the government, conspiracy against the government and forming a criminal gang. They did not enter pleas at Friday's hearing.

The case was adjourned by the judge until Oct. 10 after Mihigo's three co-accused said they had not seen the dossier of accusations. Two of them did not have lawyers.

The government said in April that Mihigo, Ntamuhanga and Dukuzumuremyi were under investigation for planning to overthrow the government and inciting violence. Their case was moved to the High Court from another court, and Niyibizi was eventually also detained.

Mihigo, a Tutsi survivor of Rwanda's 1994 genocide, was well-known for singing the national anthem at official ceremonies, including some attended by the president.

This year, he released a song called "Meaning of Death" that was banned by the authorities, apparently for touching on sensitive issues about the genocide, when 800,000 minority Tutsis and moderates from the Hutu majority were killed by Hutus.

The government describes the 1994 killings as the genocide of Tutsis, a title some Hutus complain ignores the many Hutus killed then or after in what they call revenge attacks.

Kagame, a Tutsi who led a guerrilla force which halted the killings, has said he wants to make a society of "Rwandese" without ethnic divisions.

Critics accuse Kagame of concentrating too much power in his own hands and stamping out dissent.

Reporting by Clement Uwiringiyimana; writing by Edmund Blair; editing by Edith Honan and Andrew Roche

