

From Hero of 'Hotel Rwanda,' to Dissident, to 25 Year Prison Sentence

The trial of Paul Rusesabagina, whose story was portrayed in the Oscar-nominated movie, was denounced by human rights advocates as a “show trial” intended to silence critics of Rwanda’s president.

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[New York Times](#)



Paul Rusesabagina arriving at court in Kigali, Rwanda, last October. He was tried on nine charges, but has refused to attend his trial since March and did not appear for the verdict on Monday. Simon Wohlfahrt/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

KIGALI, Rwanda — Paul Rusesabagina, who was portrayed in the Oscar-nominated movie “Hotel Rwanda,” was found guilty on Monday of forming and funding a group that carried out terrorist attacks in Rwanda, and was sentenced to 25 years in prison. The monthslong case had drawn international condemnation after government officials boasted about having tricked him into returning to Rwanda.

He was once praised for sheltering more than 1,200 people in the hotel he managed during the [genocide in Rwanda in 1994](#) that killed as many as one million people.

But he gradually became one of the most high-profile critics of Rwanda’s longtime leader, Paul Kagame, calling out the president for his increasingly repressive rule. Mr. Kagame in turn accused Mr. Rusesabagina of profiting from invented stories about his heroism and of financing armed rebel groups to overthrow his government.

Mr. Rusesabagina was tried along with 20 other defendants who were convicted, and sentenced to three to 20 years in prison, on charges that included treason, murder, arson and belonging to a terrorist organization. He received the harshest penalty of all.

While all 20 appeared in the packed courtroom on Monday in their pink prison uniforms, Mr. Rusesabagina has been boycotting the trial since March and refused to appear for the verdict and sentencing. The judge said she declined to reduce his sentence because he had refused to attend the trial.

Judge Beatrice Mukamurenzi said in her ruling: “He founded a terrorist organization that attacked Rwanda. He financially contributed to terrorist

activities. He approved monthly provisions of funds for these activities He invented a code to hide these activities.”

But many scholars and human rights advocates say that Mr. Rusesabagina, who is 67, was unjustly accused for the government’s political purposes.

The other defendants tried with Mr. Rusesabagina on terrorism charges arrive at the Supreme Court in Kigali, Rwanda on Monday. Simon Wohlfahrt/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

“This trial fits into a long history in Rwanda of silencing dissent,” said Timothy P. Longman, a professor of political science and international affairs at Boston University and the author of two books on Rwanda. “The message has been clearly sent that no Rwandan is safe to speak out against President Kagame and the ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front.”

Geoffrey Robertson, who was monitoring the trial for the Clooney Foundation for Justice, said, “This was a show trial, rather than a fair judicial inquiry.”

At the heart of [Rwanda’s case](#) against Mr. Rusesabagina was his leadership role in the Rwanda Movement for Democratic Change, a coalition of opposition groups in exile whose armed wing, the National Liberation Front (known by the initials F.L.N.), is accused of being responsible for attacks inside Rwanda that killed nine people in 2018. Prosecutors described the 20 other defendants as fighters involved in those attacks.

Yolande Makolo, a spokeswoman for the Rwandan government, said in a statement: “This lengthy trial has exposed the terrorist activities of the F.L.N. group led by Rusesabagina. The evidence against the accused was indisputable, and the people of Rwanda will feel safer now justice has been delivered. The trial has been a long and painful ordeal for the victims.”

Some of Mr. Rusesabagina’s co-defendants recanted their testimony against him, saying that he had never belonged to a rebel group or ordered attacks. Among them was Callixte Nsabimana, the armed group’s former

spokesman, who was found guilty on Monday of genocide denial and of forging documents, and was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

Mr. Rusesabagina had been living in Texas last year when [he was deceived by Rwandan government operatives](#) into getting on a plane in Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates, that took him to Kigali. He says he was initially denied access to attorneys of his choosing, held in solitary confinement and tortured in a secret detention center.

He and his lawyers say that his rights to confidential communication and to prepare his defense [have been repeatedly violated](#). The trial, which began in February, received widespread condemnation from Mr. Rusesabagina's family, rights groups, legal associations, and European and American lawmakers. More than three dozen U.S. senators and representatives [have urged Mr. Kagame to release him](#).

"It's been so painful to watch this trial," said Carine Kanimba, Mr. Rusesabagina's daughter, who watched the proceedings online from Belgium. "We knew they would find him guilty. The script was written long before he entered the courtroom. This verdict means nothing."

"There has been violation after violation in this trial," said Carine Kanimba, Mr. Rusesabagina's daughter. "My father is still an illegally detained man." John Thys/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Mr. Rusesabagina was the manager of the luxurious Hotel des Mille Collines, in Kigali, in 1994 when militias of the Hutu ethnic group began a slaughter that primarily targeted ethnic Tutsis. Mr. Rusesabagina turned the hotel into a haven for 1,268 Tutsis and moderate Hutus — using cash, alcohol and diplomacy to fend off the would-be killers.

Fearing for his safety in the years after the genocide, he sought political asylum in Belgium. His profile was raised after the movie "Hotel Rwanda" was released to critical acclaim, earning him global accolades including the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President George W. Bush in 2005.

But it was Mr. Rusesabagina's 2006 memoir, "An Ordinary Man," that [put him in direct conflict with Kigali](#). In it, he wrote that Mr. Kagame governed Rwanda "for the benefit of a small group of elite Tutsis," and that the Central African nation had "a cosmetic democracy and a hollow system of justice."

Soon after, Rwandan officials began accusing him of exaggerating his role during the genocide, as well as of aiding rebel groups. After a series of threats and home intrusions in Brussels, he moved his family to San Antonio, Texas.

Mr. Rusesabagina in court in Kigali in February. Rwandan officials have accused him of exaggerating his role during the genocide in the 1990s. Muhizi Olivier/Associated Press

In August last year, he flew to Dubai, where he boarded a private jet with Constantin Niyomwungere, a pastor whom he called his "friend" and who he said had [invited him to speak to churches](#) in Burundi, Rwanda's neighbor.

But Mr. Niyomwungere was an agent for Rwandan intelligence and had been [part of a setup to lure Mr. Rusesabagina to Rwanda](#). The private jet, operated by the Greece-based firm GainJet and [paid for by the Rwandan government](#), landed in Kigali, where Mr. Rusesabagina was tied up, blindfolded and arrested.

For days, he was held at a location he described as a "slaughterhouse," where he remained bound and unable to breathe properly, according to his lawyers.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch said that the arrest amounted to an enforced disappearance, a violation of international law.

The Rwandan authorities denied that Mr. Rusesabagina had been mistreated. But they did not hide their glee in apprehending him. Rwanda's spy chief, Maj. Gen. Joseph Nzabamwita, called it a "wonderful intelligence operation."

The trial officially began in February after the court rejected Mr. Rusesabagina's argument that he could not be tried in Rwanda because he was no longer a citizen. A Belgian citizen and a permanent resident of the United States, he was denied bail, though his family and lawyers said he has had cancer, heart disease and hypertension.

Callixte Nsabimana, left, a former rebel spokesman, seen during a court hearing in 2019, recanted his testimony against Mr. Rusesabagina. Cyril Ndegeya/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

In June, Mr. Rusesabagina's lawyers said authorities had told him they would [stop his access to food, water and medicine](#) — a move that, they said, was meant to pressure him to return to trial. The Rwandan authorities denied doing that.

With the trial over, efforts by Western governments to pressure the Rwandan government to release Mr. Rusesabagina may gain momentum, according to those involved. President Biden is expected to see Mr. Kagame when they meet in October for a Group of 20 summit in Rome.