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E-MAIL:

Rwandan court suspends trial of bishop charged with 1994 genocide

April 24, 2000

Web posted at: 9:46 AM EDT (1346 GMT)

KIGALI, Rwanda (AP) -- The trial of the first Roman Catholic bishop ever to be charged with genocide was suspended on Monday for two weeks.

Presiding Judge Jariel Rutaremara ruled that Augustin Misago, who has pleaded innocent to eight charges of genocide, complicity in genocide and crimes against humanity during Rwanda's 1994 genocide, will be given 14-days rest under medical supervision.

The 56-year-old bishop, who faces the death penalty if convicted, did not attend Monday's proceedings because of high blood pressure, defense attorney Alfred Pognon said.

The trial will resume on May 9 when closing arguments will be heard.

More than 500,000 Tutsis and politically moderate Hutus were killed before Tutsi-led rebels won power in July 1994 and stopped the killings.

In a highly publicized trial that has strained Rwanda's relations with the Vatican, Misago has denied charges that he sent three priests and more than 10 schoolchildren to their deaths by denying them shelter in his parish.

When the massacres began in April 1994, he was the top church authority in the southern Gikongoro Diocese where tens of thousands died.

Misago, who was arrested in April 1998, is the most prominent of more than 20 nuns and priests accused of participating in the genocide. Two priests were convicted and sentenced to death last year.

The government believes the Catholic church was complicit, through its silence, in the 90-day slaughter. Most of the victims were hacked to death in churches, where they had sought refuge, often with complicity of priests and nuns.

The Vatican is the only church that has failed to apologize for its role in the genocide. It has said only individuals can be held responsible.

Misago has argued throughout the trial he was an innocent bystander and claims he did not have the authority to prevent the killings. The bishop says he is being used as a scapegoat.

Pognon, who is from Benin, has said the prosecution has failed to prove Misago's direct involvement in the massacres and that the bishop should be released.

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More than 125,000 genocide suspects are jailed in Rwanda. More than 1,500 have been tried so far and 300 have been sentenced to death. The first 22 were publicly executed on April 24, 1998.

Rwanda is the most Catholic nation in Africa, with 4.8 million, or 62 percent, of the country's pre-genocide population of 7.8 million identifying with the faith. Rwanda now has around 8.2 people.

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