

Independent

Legacy of genocide: alive, well; and living in Britain

Both the perpetrators and victims fled the massacres in Rwanda. But now a new law targeting war crime suspects means no one can escape their past

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In the postcard-perfect parish church of St Mary's in Frinton-on-Sea yesterday, a middle-aged African lady sat listening to the morning service. In a floral outfit, a simple gold cross around her neck, Marie Nikuze sat as parishioners around her said prayers for her husband – a man accused of having an inconceivable amount of blood on his hands.

Since she and her husband, Celestin Ugirashebuja, settled in the area nine years ago, the parishioners of Frinton have campaigned for Mr Ugirashebuja despite him being accused of playing a key role in the 1994 Rwandan genocide in which 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed.

And while Mrs Nikuze, 58, was listening to the words of the Rev Don Smith, her husband was undoubtedly considering the ramifications of a change in the law that may now see him tried in Britain for his alleged part in the mass murder.

Among the accusations levelled at Mr Ugirashebuja, 56, is that – as bourgmestre, or mayor, of the Kigoma commune – he used his authority to encourage Tutsis to return home only for them to be slaughtered. He is, lawyers claim, responsible for "many thousands of Tutsi lives".

Previous unsuccessful extradition hearings have heard that he visited sectors in his commune, encouraging residents to identify their enemy, to "destroy and bring down the structures of houses they burned and remove dead bodies so foreigners could not find evidence and discover what happened". He had, lawyers for the Rwandan government claimed, organised roadblocks where he urged Hutus to kill escaping Tutsis and distributed guns.

But the elderly inhabitants of Frinton-on-Sea are adamant that it is patently ludicrous to suggest that Mr Ugirashebuja – a studiously polite, God-fearing resident of nearby Walton on the Naze in Essex – is a war criminal. In Frinton, a middle England seaside enclave where the sweets are still sold in jars, the former Rwandan major has found a thick security blanket. Once dubbed the town that time forgot, Frinton may have battled in vain to ban pubs from its streets but it is determined to put up an equally staunch fight for its adoptive resident.

Should Mr Ugirashebuja end up in a British court, Mr Smith said, he was sure some of his fellow worshippers would support him from the public gallery. Some at the church – where croquet was

planned for yesterday afternoon, "weather permitting" – had helped the couple financially as they were not allowed to work. "I think he and anybody else would welcome a trial as there is no evidence to suggest he is guilty of crimes and plenty to suggest that he is not," Mr Smith said.

"His innocence has been proved. The Rwandan government want to prosecute somebody and they will use anybody as a scapegoat. The British Government have been put in a difficult position. They have only heard part of the story, the part the Rwandan government wants to be heard but there is a wider, bigger story that can be told."

Nearby, Mrs Nikuze responded heatedly to suggestions that her husband was responsible for such brutal killings. Gesticulating, she said: "My mother is Tutsi, my father Hutu. He is innocent. Many people know that. My family, all of them, know that."

After almost a decade in Britain, Mr Ugirashebuja may now get his chance to plead his innocence in court. The indictment issued by the Rwandan authorities states: "He held meetings in different sectors, during which he sensitised Hutus to kill Tutsis. Some of the meetings he held prompted massacres of Tutsis at a very large scale."

Mr Ugirashebuja and three co-accused were arrested in 2006 on suspicion of involvement in the genocide. They deny the accusations. A decision by the Home Secretary to allow extradition was thrown out by the High Court after judges ruled there was "a real risk they would suffer a flagrant denial of justice". The decision sparked calls for reform. Campaigners argued the UK had become a safe haven from justice.

Mr Ugirashebuja's solicitor, Colin Nott, said yesterday that his client would wait to see how any law reforms would affect him. "We would consider a trial here to be fairly unrealistic.

"If there was a trial, he would be pleading not guilty."

He countered claims from Frinton that he would welcome a court appearance: "Whoever in their right state of mind wants to go through a trial? Having said that, if it happens, it gives him an opportunity to prove his innocence."