Voices from the Rwanda Tribunal

Official Transcript: François Bembatoum (Part 3 of 6)

Role:	Chief Interpreter
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Location:	Arusha, Tanzania
Interviewers:	Lisa P. Nathan John McKay
Videographer:	Max Andrews
Interpreter:	None

Interview Summary

François Bembatoum speaks to the challenges of translating testimonies at the ICTR, emphasizing the necessity to remain neutral when translating emotional or graphic material, and noting that important nuances described by witnesses can be easily lost in translation. He draws attention to the gradual desensitization of Tribunal staff to human suffering as a result of their work, advocating strongly for trained medical professionals to provide psychological support to Tribunal personnel, as well as to detainees and witnesses.

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Part 3

00:00 **Lisa P. Nathan: So as you look back at – you've, you've been at the ICTR for a long time and you've seen a lot. Before I ask you any more questions I want you to have the opportunity to tell me, to tell the future anything – any reflection that you have, an experience that you've had that you would like to share about your time here.**

00:27 Yeah. After, after 12 years with ICTR of course I mean I came to a number of conclusions. The first conclusion is that human beings can behave worse than animals. I was privileged to be in court listening to the victims telling the judges their story, et cetera, and I came to the conclusion that animals do not do that to their victims, you know. So from that point of view, man is most probably the worst beast that you can think of.

01:12 Another experience that I went through and which I will probably live with for the rest of my life is the, the trauma, the trauma that I went through. You are human being, you are not, you are not, you are n-, you may not be directly involved, okay, but you are a human being with a sensitivity, you have a family, children, et cetera.

01:43 When a witness is there facing you or rather facing the judges and telling his or her story, the horrors that she or he went through, or his or her relatives went through – inevitably there is this phenomenon of identification. You know, you identify, you know, with the victim, you know. And you feel it deep inside you, and you dream about it, you know, in your sleep not once, not twice, you know, it goes and comes. Okay.

02:22 Now the third thing that I want to, to say is that I think working with the tribunal for so many years and listening to all those horrors sort of dehumanized me. My sensitivity to human suffering sort of diminished. Yeah.

02:45 I remember telling some of my new colleagues that came on board – I used to tell them, "You are going to hear terrible things in court, but the day you walk out of court and you are able to crack a joke or to laugh aloud it means that you're already changing. It means that you have become less sensitive to human suffering." And this is something I think that my, my, my nature is no longer the same. I'm, I'm a different person.

03:26 **LPN: So you said that you used to tell your colleagues – new colleagues this. Do you still tell them that?**

03:33 Yes. I still tell them, yes. And they went through the experience themselves and later on I mean we, we discuss – we do discuss it, you know, from time to time actually. We do, yes.

03:46 **LPN: And do you think that helps you as a human being?**

03:51 Talking about it certainly helps but a lot more could have been done in terms of, in terms of assistance. I, I remember, I remember there, there was one lady, a psychiatrist

that had come to see me in my office and, and she was looking for a job in our section, which is basically language section and language support. I told her, "Listen there, there's nothing I can do to help you get a job in this section, however there is a lot of work for you out there."

04:37 And I had in mind places like UNDF, I mean with the detainees; the witnesses, the majority of who are victims or relatives to some of the victims. They were eyewitnesses in genocides, they were, they were involved, they were, they could have become victims and therefore they went through the whole trauma. They needed some psychiatric counseling, call it what you want.

05:16 And she told me, "But how do I go about mentioning it to the, to the top management?" I said, "Okay, sit down, write something, sit down." So she sat down and we, we started writing something.

05:32 You know, there are some professional groups that run the risk of trauma because they operate in court. Of course the parties, but that is their job, I guess they are used to it. But how about the security officers, how about the, the registry officers, the language support services staff?

06:00 You know, we are not used to that; the judges probably in their – when they were younger or in their past professions, you know, had an opportunity to hear about such things. It was not my case and it was not the case of the majority of my colleague interpreters, you see.

06:23 So she wrote the letter and took it to the then registrar and she got the job. She got the job but only for the detainees in the, in the UNDF, not even for the witnesses, leave alone for the staff, because the registrar then was of the opinion that we did not need any counseling.

06:51 And then much later, I think it was last year or the year before there was one session. Ever. For the 12 years that I've, I've been here in ICTR there was only one counseling session about trauma and yet this is something that should have been done again and again, right from the word go.

07:18 How about the investigations that go out on the field and participates in digging of bodies, identifying them, taking pieces of clothes, removing pieces of clothes on the bodies in order to build the evidence, et cetera? They don't need counseling? Nobody thought it was necessary.