



Voices from the Rwanda Tribunal

Official Transcript: Ellis Odjurhe (Full Interview)



Role:	Prison Operations Officer
Country of Origin:	Nigeria
Interview Date:	16 October 2008
Location:	Arusha, Tanzania
Interviewer:	Lisa P. Nathan
Videographer:	Max Andrews
Interpreter:	None

Interview Summary

Ellis Odjurhe speaks about his responsibilities as a Prison Operations Officer where he oversees the daily operations of the Tribunal's detention facilities. He stresses the need for improved security measures to adequately protect detainees and prison staff. He also emphasizes the need for rules to apply equally to judges, lawyers, investigators and others. Odjurhe further calls attention to the Tribunal's humanitarian and high quality detention services that stand in contrast with the poverty and harassment many detainees face after release.

The transcript of the interview begins on the following page.

Part 1

- 1
- 2 **00:00** Lisa P. Nathan: Thank you for your time, greatly appreciate it, we know that you are
3 very busy. So I will ask you questions and some of them I may ask "why" just so I
4 understand better or if I don't understand a technical term because this is not my
5 area.
- 6 00:15 Okay.
- 7 **00:16** LPN: So to begin with could you tell me your name and what country you are from?
- 8 00:20 Okay, my name is Ellis Odjurhe. I'm a Nigerian.
- 9 **00:28** LPN: And what is your role here?
- 10 00:31 At the detention, this, at the detention facility here I'm here as the OIC Operations,
11 which means that I take care of the daily operations of the, of the detention facility.
- 12 **00:48** LPN: So can you tell me about your background before you came here?
- 13 00:50 Okay. Before I came here I was in the Nigerian police force for 21 years, and during the
14 course of that I had the privilege of serving with the UN as a Training Officer in
15 Cambodia. That was in 1992 to '93. I was responsible for training of the police in a
16 (___)-, a particular province known as Kampong Cham. At the end of the mission I, I
17 went back to Nigeria and when I returned to Nigeria I continued with my duties as a
18 police officer. In fact I was of the rank of an Assistant Superintendent.
- 19 01:39 After about a year I decided to go on a voluntary retirement from the police force. And
20 immediately I left the police, I mean about three years after I left the police force I just
21 thought of coming to join the UN again, having had a taste of it, before I, I thought of
22 coming to join the UN again to give me an opportunity to, you know, mix with people
23 from various part of the world. So that's how I found myself here.
- 24 02:19 And when I got here in 1998, at first I was at the headquarters there; that's the ICTR
25 Headquarters. After about a year, I was, I was moved here and I was here as a team
26 leader for a number of years, about seven years.
- 27 02:48 Then during that period I was acting occasion-, occasionally as OIC Operation whenever
28 the incumbent was on leave. And eventually some time last year I was asked, I mean I
29 was asked to come and assume the position of the OIC Operations which I have been
30 holding up to this moment.
- 31 **03:14** LPN: Thank you.
- 32 03:15 Welcome.
- 33 **03:15** LPN: Can you tell me where you were in the spring of 1994? Do you remember?

- 34 03:23 Dur- 1994? Oh, 1994 I was in Nigeria. Yeah, I was in Nigeria and I was still in the police
35 force. In fact that was the year I left the police. The (_____).
- 36 **03:36 LPN: Do, do you remember hearing about the events in Rwanda?**
- 37 03:41 Yes, yes I did.
- 38 **03:43 LPN: Can you, can you tell me more about what you remember, what you heard,
39 where you were?**
- 40 03:49 Well, what we heard that time was that there was mass killing of one particular tribe by
41 the other in Rwanda and we had some videos that were being sold in the shop. We
42 bought them, we watched them and we saw how horrifying it was.
- 43 04:14 And (____), at the time I was applying for a job I never really specifically requested to
44 come to this particular place, that is to come and serve and, in the tribunal responsible
45 for the trial of the, the Rwandese. I merely applied to become a security officer with the
46 UN but I was assigned to be here. It was not those incidents that really impelled me to
47 come here.
- 48 **04:45 LPN: When you found out that this would be where you were stationed, what did you
49 know about this facility, this, the ICTR?**
- 50 04:53 When I felt?
- 51 **04:54 LPN: Wha-, wha-, what did you know about, when you first heard that you were
52 going to be stationed here . . .**
- 53 04:59 Uh-huh.
- 54 **05:00 LPN: What did you know about the ICTR? Did you know – had you heard anything, did
55 you, do you remember?**
- 56 05:07 Yes, I heard, the first time I heard of it was when the president of America, Bill Clinton
57 that time, was proposing – and it was in a television program, I can't remember the
58 program very well, when he was talking of an intention to set up a tribunal for the trial
59 of people responsible for the Rwandan genocide. That was the first time I heard about
60 it.
- 61 05:32 And then when at the time I applied to become a security officer and I, I got the offer
62 that I had to come to this tribunal I was somehow happy that I was going to be part of a
63 system that was going to be known for fighting injustice, impunity and so forth.

64 **Part 2**

- 65 **00:00 LPN: So can you tell me about your role here; like what kind of responsibilities you
66 have?**

67 00:07 Yeah, I am here as Operations Officer. My main duty is to ensure orderliness within the
68 facility and ensure the safety of all the detainees, staff and so on. So to this end, I
69 normally organize officers in various schedules to provide security coverage for their
70 movement from here to the court.

71 00:43 And by the time they finish from the court, they are escorted safely back here. If there
72 is need for them to be evacuated for medical checkup, I make sure I make adequate
73 arrangements to see that there is sec-, security coverage for the movement. So
74 basically that is it.

75 **01:07 LPN: I'm sure it keeps you quite busy.**

76 01:09 Mm.

77 **01:10 LPN: So can you tell me, since you've been here, has there been s-, anything – you**
78 **heard me ask this question earlier – that has surprised you about the way things work**
79 **here at the ICTR or at the detention center? Or an event that surprised you?**

80 01:25 Yes, what surprises me most here is that it appears – like the Commanding Officer
81 rightly mentioned the other time – it appears that much regard is not being given for
82 security measures. When you try to apply them there is a lot of opposition.

83 01:52 When the lawyers – as he said, when the lawyers come here, most of, not all of them,
84 there are some of them who are quite cooperative, but some of them when they come
85 they give a lot of trouble to the officers at the gate.

86 02:09 For example there is no way you can say that you have searched someone when
87 actually that person is still in possession of something that is unauthorized. Somebody –
88 when you say you've searched someone it is assumed that that person is free of
89 anything that can constitute nuisance or any form of danger to the facility.

90 02:32 But here we, we, we have a situation where a lawyer will come and maybe the officer
91 at the gate ask him, "Let me open this book and see what is there." They say, "Ah, no,
92 you want to see my legal ma-, materials. You want to see my defense." Okay, if I don't
93 open it and you keep some currency notes here, there is no way the machine can
94 detect that you have currency notes there. Now you go in, you pass the, the, maybe
95 about a 1,000 or 2,000 dollars to a detainee.

96 03:05 With which if other security measures are not properly taken care of, he could, he
97 could, I mean that could aid him in facilitating his escape if he wishes to. So I think
98 there is not much support or much regard for the need to really ensure that security
99 regulations are completely obeyed.

100 03:36 Because it's really important, it's not just for any other thing it's for both the, the, the
101 protection of the detainees themselves and the staff. So I th-, I wish there was more
102 cooperation with the security system here. So.

103 **03:57** **LPN: So if you were involved in another international detention center, and it, for . . .**

104 04:03 Yeah.

105 **04:04** **LPN: . . . would there be anything else that, you mentioned security and more, more**
106 **security basically and more respect for the security.**

107 04:13 Yes.

108 **04:14** **LPN: Are there something else on your mind or a couple of other things that you can**
109 **think of that you would recommend be implemented in the future?**

110 04:22 Yes, I think not something other than what I've just said but I think basically the, the
111 idea will be the need to make the administration really understand the need for
112 security rules to be equally applied to everybody.

113 04:45 Not a section of people, not that this is a, a, a lawyer, he should be treated differ-,
114 different-, differently, this is an investigator, he should be treated differently, no. I think
115 that is what I would want the administration to really support the security with.

116 **Part 3**

117 **00:00** **LPN: Don asked if I would ask you if you've ever had any escape attempts, or that you**
118 **know of any, maybe that happened before you came.**

119 00:10 So far there has been none but it cannot be said that it cannot happen. Possibly it has
120 not happened because of the security measures in place.

121 **00:27** **LPN: Yes, I understand.**

122 00:29 And besides that, I think another thing that has made it, that has made all the detainees
123 or – yes all the detainees – not to be that inclined to escape may be the condition of
124 detention. Because I think the condition of detention here is really very good.

125 00:52 It's very good in the sense that we have seen from experience occasions when people
126 are discharged after they are, they finish their, their, their time here, they, they, they
127 are reluctant to go. Yes, they prefer this place. They said the outside is – they don't
128 consider outside that safe. We've had situations like that.

129 **01:14** **LPN: Can you say more, what do you mean by not safe?**

130 01:18 They, they, they – I don't, I don't really, I cannot say specifically what they, they, they
131 are afraid of, but they allege that, that the present, rather their, their, their antagonists
132 or rather the, the other tribe in the, in Rwanda there will be hunting them and so forth.
133 Those are their claims about it. I don't know how correct that is.

134 01:46 So I think they say that – and apart from that, there was a situation where somebody
135 actually after completing his sentence here, when he was to be discharged – an old
136 man – he was crying for days. He was saying that okay now he, he, he is not having the

137 freedom to go back to America- I think he was in, in, in the U.S. before he was arrest-, I
138 mean, his arrest.

139 02:11 And at the time when he finished his term and he was to be rel-, released, the old man
140 was crying because it was, this is a place where if at night a detainee is in trouble, he,
141 he, he calls out, the duty officer goes there to attend to him. If he needs medical
142 attention, the med-, the medical officer will be brought immediately, that -- no matter
143 what.

144 02:36 Under any conditions the, the, the medical officer wi-, will be brought. But he, I think
145 what was disturbing his mind was the idea that, "By the time I go out, would I have all
146 this help?" Because now he was not free to go back to U.S. to mi-, to mix with his f-,
147 family. I think the U.S. government, they refused him entry because he was – they, they
148 said he's a convict. As a convict they cannot admit him back to U.S.

149 03:04 So a-, after his discharge here, he had to get an accommodation around in town here.
150 The (___), the, the, the children arranged an accommodation for him to stay there in
151 town and I think later the wife came. And really not much later after that, the man
152 died. So I think he foresaw the hardship as compared with the situation here, because
153 here they are really, really comfortable.

154 Part 4

155 00:00 **LPN: So I have a question for you that is, it is not a question I'm asking you in your –**
156 **to answer as a UN – in your UN role but just as a person.**

157 00:11 Yeah.

158 00:12 **LPN: How do you feel about the, the UN does not – in the ICTR there's no capital**
159 **punishment. What do you think of that?**

160 00:20 I think it's a good idea to me in person. I think it's a good idea because I think it is not
161 for man to really – that's based on my personal philosophy . . .

162 00:30 **LPN: Mm-hmm.**

163 00:31 . . . it's not for man to really condemn a fellow man com-, entirely for any act because
164 you don't know what led to it. I think God knows better. So capital punishment should
165 be left in the hands of, of the creator not for, for, for man to, to mete out. So I think it is
166 a good idea. And it has really helped the situation here.

167 00:57 I do say it many times that here we are lucky that we are running a facility where
168 people are – the pe-, the, the, the kind of people who are sent here are not people who
169 are sentenced to death or something more horrendous. Otherwise there would have
170 been situations where the in-, the, the, the detainees or the inmates would have been
171 very desperate to . . .

172 01:32 They would try everything to beat our security measures. So that has helped us a lot
173 because with this problem we are having with this question of differentiating between
174 who to search thoroughly and who not to search thoroughly, it could be a real source of
175 danger to the facility. A lot of things can come in and which can aid the prisoner in
176 escape.

177 01:57 So when they consider the fact that, "After all I'm, I'm not, I'm not sentenced to death,
178 maybe f-, after some time I will still get out of the jail (____) and the condition here is
179 not bad," so there, there, there is no cause for them to be that desperate to break out
180 of jail. So I think it has really helped us.

181 **02:17 LPN: Thank you. For my last question I would like to know what you think about**
182 **justice, 'cause here in this facility now you have some people who are accused, but**
183 **you also have people who have been found guilty of genocide and for crimes against**
184 **humanity and here they are in your facility. And I'm, I wonder what your thoughts on**
185 **justice are.**

186 02:39 Okay, can you explain that properly again? We have people who are?

187 **02:43 LPN: Well you have people here who have been tried and convicted . . .**

188 02:48 Yeah.

189 **02:49 LPN: . . . of some very horrific crimes. So I'm sure you've thought about those crimes .**
190 **..**

191 02:56 Yes, yes. Yes.

192 **02:57 LPN: . . . what these people have done. And here they are in this international justice**
193 **system.**

194 03:02 Mm-hmm.

195 **03:03 LPN: What do you think about that?**

196 03:05 Well I think the international justice system is a good thing to encourage, because it will
197 really help this idea of impunity. This idea of people being in power and feeling that
198 they can do whatever they like. It will really discourage it. And if it can, if the United
199 Nations can really carry this to a far extent to reach everywhere, I think there would be
200 more sanity in the world, yes.

201 **03:37 LPN: I hope you're right. I, I did tell a mistruth, I have one more. If you could speak to**
202 **the Rwandan people, what would you want to tell them?**

203 03:47 I-, in what respect?

204 **03:49 LPN: As you're – in your role here at the detention center. There have been I'm, I**
205 **know – I am sure you have read . . .**

206 03:56 Okay.

207 **03:57 LPN: . . . the critiques of Rwandans, so what would you want them to know?**

208 04:00 Well, I think the average Rwandan's intention or hope is that those found guilty should
209 be condemned completely. That's – I don't know if I'm quite right but I think from some
210 media report we used to hear from time to time, they criticize everything. Every liberal
211 step we take here, they criticize it. It's to tell them that, that punishment or whatever
212 should be left in the hands of the judicial system to decide.

213 04:41 Whatever the judicial system decide should be accepted. The idea of expecting the
214 extreme to happen is not a very good idea. That should be left in the hands of God and
215 they should learn to forgive and forget.

216 **05:00 LPN: Thank you. Thank you very much for your time, sir.**

217 05:05 Thank you.