

NEWS

Lavish life of a war criminal inside a Rwandan jail



Issa Hassan Sesay, centre, at his trial on April 8, 2009 in Freetown.

By all standards, Issa Hassan Sesay, a convicted international war criminal and former leader of Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebel group, is a remarkable man.

"Imagine, I am convicted for rape, torture and killing and sentenced to 52 years in jail," he tells a young student of journalism from Uganda somewhat wistfully. "Yet the UN Tribunal knows, or should know, that that is the stuff war is made of." Convicting him for such crimes, Sesay believes, is like convicting Lionel Messi for scoring a goal in the European Champions League or the Spanish La Liga. He adds that the Allies committed worse war crimes during World War II and were not punished for them.

I had brought a group of 21 students from Makerere University and Uganda Christian University, most of them studying journalism, to Mpanga Prison as part of a tour of Rwanda. The students belong to a discussion group I manage where we debate national, regional and global political economy. Since Rwanda features a lot in our discussion, we decided to visit the country in order to have a firsthand experience of its realities.

The students had heard numerous stories of suffering in Rwandan prisons — congestion, dirt, torture, disease — but after hearing about decent conditions at the prison in Butare, where the inmates even played a game of volleyball with us, I brought them to the international section of Mpanga for another impression.

Protected by the UN, these convicted war criminals are more likely to feel free to express their unhappiness with their conditions than the local convicts. And Sesay, the man who took over command of the RUF after the arrest founding leader Foday Musa Sankoh, is now the leader of the prisoners here. And true to form, he was ready to disabuse the students of the "rosy" picture painted of Rwandan prisons by its government and its propagandists.

He first complained bitterly about me. He said I had visited him last year, listened to his story, taken pictures and written nothing about his predicament. His fellow prisoners agreed. Yet to my recollection, Sesay did not have many complaints then. He had told me the Rwandan prison warders were treating him well. His complaint was against the UN for convicting him of war crimes, even though whatever he had done had been "political." I promised to publish a story about his complaints if he told me about them.

"We are going through untold suffering here," he told the students. "We are being mistreated by these Rwandan prison warders. I am telling you all this to their face because I really no longer care. They are bad people," he said as the Rwandan prison guards look at him in silent wonderment. From the expression on the face of the chief of security at the prison, he was clearly uncomfortable at Sesay's open hostility perhaps regretting allowing us into the premises. The students seemed all too happy to hear it all. And Sesay was ready to tell it.

Laundry list of complains

First, Sesay said, the prison cooks did not always follow the menu. For example, on April 9, he was served tea with sugar, powdered milk, sausages, baked beans and bread for his breakfast. But the menu also said he was supposed to be served yoghurt as desert. He didn't get any. Besides, he added, with the confidence of a man who knows his rights, the menu was substandard because it should have included scrambled eggs as well.

"I tell you, these people don't follow the menu," he declared as students stretched their necks to look at the paper he was holding in his hand, "On April 12, I was supposed to be served mineral water for lunch but instead these cooks gave me a soft drink — a Coke. How can they?"

And on another day, Sesay told the amused students, he was supposed to be served a fruit salad after his dinner, which the cooks omitted. He brought out the book where he signs every time he is served food as proof. True to his claim, the menu stated that there would be fruits served after dinner but the cooks gave him a cheese cake for desert.

"Believe me when I tell you that these people don't follow the menu... you see?"

He also complained that he is tired of chicken, fish, beef and groundnuts on his menu daily. "I have not eaten the whole of this week," he went on, "the menu is monotonous."

Moving around the international section of Mpanga prison, led by an angrily gesticulating Sesay, is an experience to remember. Behind us was a group of baffled and clearly embarrassed Rwandan prison officials and guards. Sesay, on the other hand, walked with a swagger. He was wearing a designer jacket on top of an expensive T-shirt and tracksuit bottoms complete with brand new white sneakers. Although in his mid 50s, Sesay looks to be in his mid 30s and has the air of a man who knows he would have become president of Sierra Leone had the UN, Ecomog, Tony Blair and other such enemies of the revolution not intervened to block him.

Sesay complained that the prisoners are "only" allowed to call their families six days a week (Monday to Saturday), but not on Sundays. That, he said, amounts to torture. Why not allow him to talk to his wife and children on Sunday, a day of worship? And to make matters worse, the prison provides him newspapers like *The EastAfrican*, *Daily Nation*, *Daily Monitor*, *New Vision* and *New Times*. But they don't provide him and his group newspapers from West Africa, which is where he comes from. Or they could provide him the *Financial Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* that have global significance. This, he told us, has made his life in Rwanda difficult. I was saddened to hear that the Rwandans don't give him the *Independent*, the newspaper I work for. Perhaps

with that he would complain less.

In the TV room, Sesay and his colleagues have a 32-inch plasma flat-screen complete with DSTV. Upon entering the room, we found a live English Premier League match on.

“That is not enough for Sesay,” Isaac Musimenta, one of the journalism students complained sarcastically on Sesay’s behalf. “He needs a 50-inch plasma screen in HD so that he can watch his games properly.”

When we visited his gym and saw a shower next to it, another journalism student, Nicolas Bwana, said — again sarcastically — that Sesay should have been provided a bathtub instead. Sesay turned to accept the recommendation with the assurance of a man realising that his listeners had got his point: “You see?” he said, “That is what I am talking about.”

In his self-contained room, Sesay has a radio, newspapers, blockbuster movies and books on a reading table. He also has a wardrobe full of clothes, a shower and flush toilet. He has a long line of shoes stretching from one corner of the room to another. In the bathroom, he has toilet soap, Vim and Harpic. He complained that those are the only disinfectants provided by Rwanda’s mean prison guards — ignoring other vital items such as air freshener. The students were now making a game of it; now Sandra Akello asked why Sesay did not have a Jacuzzi, at which Sesay nodded enthusiastically.

When we visited the computer lab, where he and fellow prisoners take lessons in computer science, business management, economics, political economy etc, Sesay was not amused at the excitement our group expressed at the HP desktops provided to him and his fellow prisoners.

“We are not allowed access to the Internet,” he pointed out. I chipped in that he should have been provided Macs instead of HPs, at which he turned and looked at me with shining eyes. I added that he should be provided with a fully loaded iPad, a suggestion he embraced with open arms, although it seemed to me he did not know what a Mac or iPad really was.

Finally, it was time to visit his tormentors in the kitchen. There it was: The freezer, stocked with frozen fish, goat meat and chicken, icecream and butter. “They bought most of this stuff when they heard that you were coming to visit,” he said in a low voice. Realising that one cook had overheard, he changed the tone and claimed that his problem was not the absence of food but the prison cooks not adhering to the menu.

Inside the dry food store were packed juice, tinned beef, UHT milk, biscuits, eggs, instant coffee, tomato ketchup, fresh pineapples, baked beans, powdered milk, packets of tea leaves etc. Some students joked to prison guards that they would like to take Sesay’s place in prison. Even I envied Sesay since my freezer at home does not have such an assortment of goodies. It all looked like a 5-star hotel, not a prison.

But Sesay did not see any of that. At least I would agree that his room, although much better than any students’ room in the best hostel at Makerere University, was certainly not to 5-star hotel standards. And for a man who would have become president of Sierra Leone if the evil Blair had not intervened, who can question his right to complain of mistreatment in Rwanda’s Mpanga Prison?

The writer is the publisher of The Independent of Uganda