

Envoy's search for justice shows Rwanda's dark side

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KIGALI, Rwanda — Sylvestre Kamali finally broke down.

Imprisoned for 21 days, he was tired, hurting and badly in need of a bath.

A career diplomat, he has served his country in all branches, including terms as vice president of the Supreme Court and ambassador to Belgium, Burundi and China.

Now Kamali was wearing the gray pants and white shirt he had on the day he was arrested in July. He was unshaven and he had no shoes. He had not been given his medication and special diet for a colon condition.

The tears came this day when he was told the new leaders of Rwanda are holding him on a charge of genocide. His jaw dropped. He looked at his two prison guards and his face spread into a smile of incredulity.

"I am happy because now I know the reason why I am in prison," the diplomat said in an interview with reporters from the Daily News and The Washington Post last

week. It was the first time he had been seen by people other than his jailers since his arrest in July.

In his native language, Kinyarwanda, as a prison guard translated, he said, "They told me my car did not have all the proper papers.

"Me, Kamali?" he asked, shaking his head in disbelief. "Me, Kamali? From the

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time I was brought unto this earth until now, and I am 59 years old, I have never killed anyone, or ordered anyone to be killed."

Caught in the maelstrom that is following the civil war orgy of violence in Rwanda, Kamali's case will be one for the world to see if the new Rwandan government will restore peace in the land with justice.

It is a crucial time as the United Nations is trying to convince hundreds of thousands of refugees to return to their homeland from the disease-ridden camps of Zaire.

If Kamali cannot be safe, cannot get justice, can anyone?

The new Rwandan Prime Minister Faustin Twagiramungu said recently he wants trials to start soon, not later, and that those found guilty be put to death by firing squad.

The new government has had its hands full just taking the reins of power. It has not had the time to adequately investigate the atrocities.

Witnesses are dead or out of the country dying in refugee camps. Suspects like Kamali have not been told of their crimes, much less allowed to see lawyers.

Phillippe Reinsjens, a professor of law and politics at Antwerp University who has written extensively on Rwanda, said the new government position appeared to be that if you are not with them, then you must be a Hutu extremist bent on killing Tutsis.

In a telephone interview, Jo Wells, an Amnesty International official in London who began monitoring the political persecution of Kamali in 1992, said Kamali

might actually be a victim of a simple political vendetta.

The vendetta theory stems from the fact that Kamali, a Hutu moderate married to a Tutsi, once took Twagiramungu, a Tutsi, to court in a dispute over a seat in a proposed transitional parliament. Kamali won the right to represent the town of Gisenyi in the dispute.

As further proof of his independence, Kamali had once been attacked by the Interahamwe, a Hutu militia group, Wells said. "They tried to kill him. They burned down his home in Gisenyi and killed members of his family. I find it hard to believe that he is now one of them."

Twagiramungu acknowledged Kamali as a "political adversary" but denied that had anything to do with the arrest.

"I would be surprised if Twagiramungu put me in jail," Kamali said. "We have differences, but not because we don't think alike. We share the same philosophy. We just fought about my position in the new government."