

# Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

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## Responses to Information Requests

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7 June 2013

### **BDI104471.E**

Burundi: Treatment of the followers of the religious leader Eusébie Ngendakumana (also known as Zebiya) by authorities (2011-June 2013)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

#### **1. Eusébie (Zebiya) Ngendakumana**

According to Radio Isanganiro, a Burundi-based radio broadcasting station founded in 2002, which is also available on the Internet in real time (Radio Isanganiro n.d.), Eusébie Ngendakumana [also known as Zebiya] was born in Businde's Hill which is located around 20 km from the center of the province of Kayanza, in the north of Burundi (Radio Isanganiro 12 Nov. 2012). Radio Isanganiro reported that Zebiya completed a five-year catechumen class, which was given by the Catholic Church, and which "resulted in obtaining the sacraments" (ibid.).

Zebiya Ngendakumana claims to see visions of the Virgin Mary on the 12th of each month (*The Africa Report* 13 Mar. 2013; AFP 15 Apr. 2013; CWN 12 Mar. 2013). She welcomes followers, particularly between the 11th and the 13th of each month on Businde' Hill (Radio Isanganiro 12 Nov. 2012; COSOME 24 Oct. 2012; CNIDH 13 Mar. 2013). Cited in the *Africa Report*, a monthly publication dedicated to African affairs published by the Jeune Afrique Group (*The Africa Report* n.d.), Zebiya said that she "began seeing apparitions of the Virgin Mary 20 years ago" (ibid. 13 Mar. 2013). She also added that she saw Jesus in 1996 (ibid.). According to the Burundian Civil Society Coalition for the Monitoring and the Observation of Elections (Coalition de la société civile pour le monitoring électoral - COSOME), Zebiya also stated that [translation] "Virgin Mary has put her in charge of spreading a certain number of messages, such as to wear the veil for women and girls" (COSOME 24 Oct. 2012). The *Africa Report* also mentioned that Zebiya "has so far been to neighbouring Rwanda, Kenya, Tanzania, Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda and Ethiopia on a crusade about her visions" (*The Africa Report* 13 Mar. 2013). The group of followers of Zebiya reportedly started gathering at Businde's Hill at the beginning of 2012 (ibid.; BBC 12 Mar. 2013). Sources describe Zebiya's group as a "cult" (*The Africa Report* 13 Mar. 2013; CNIDH 13 Mar. 2013) or as a "sect" (BBC 12 Mar. 2013; COSOME 24 Oct. 2012).

Burundi's population is mainly Catholic (*The Africa Report* 13 Mar. 2013; BBC 12 Mar. 2013; DPA 13 Mar. 2013).

#### **1.1 Zebiya's Relations with Authorities**

Reuters indicated in 2013 that "Ngendakumana and her followers were previously members of the Catholic church, but split from it more than a year ago" (12 Mar. 2013). Agence France-Presse (AFP) also indicated that Zebiya's relation with the [translation] "Catholic hierarchy has deteriorated over time" (AFP [2013]). Zebiya's group is not recognized by the Catholic Church (Burundi 21 Mar. 2013; Radio Isanganiro 12 Nov. 2012) and the Catholic Bishop of Ngozi asked her in November to stop her activities and has forbidden any sect in Businde (*The Africa Report* 13 Mar. 2013).

Also, a BBC journalist reports that "[t]he sect has had a tense relationship with Burundi's government since its formation" (BBC 12 Mar. 2013). According to the National Independent Human Rights Commission (Commission nationale indépendante des droits de l'homme, CNIDH) of Burundi, an independent state agency created by law in January 2011 (CNIDH n.d.), a prohibition to practice their cult was ordered in October 2012 by the administrative authority (ibid. 13 Mar. 2013). Radio Bonesha FM, a Bujumbura independent radio station (CPJ Feb. 2002), reported in March 2013 that [translation] "even though the Businde's cult place has been forbidden by local authorities for more than 6 months, the followers of the young lady have never respected the authorities and the council of Catholic bishops' decision" (Radio Bonesha FM 12 Mar. 2013). In a meeting held on 29 April 2013 between Burundi's Minister of External Affairs and International Cooperation, diplomatic and consular officials and representatives of accredited international organizations in Bujumbura, the Minister of Home Affairs said that [translation] "the [cult's] site will remain closed to prayers until the Catholic Church recognizes the apparitions of Zebiya and that any violation of this interdiction would be punished in accordance with the law" (Burundi 2 May 2013). The National Security Council has also recommended to consider Zebiya

and her followers as "outlaws" (PANAPress 21 Mar. 2013; International Crisis Group 1 Apr. 2013) until [translation] "they become legal" (Burundi 21 Mar. 2013).

## **2. Clashes Between Zebiya's Group and the Government**

### **2.1 October 2012**

A group of Zebiya's followers, in which women and girls were wearing the veil, entered the Rukago Church on 21 October 2012, even though veils are not allowed in the Church (COSOME 24 Oct. 2012; SDBAGL Mar. 2013). According to the priest of Rukago parish, the [translation] "most dangerous members" were arrested by the police and "taken to Kayanza and to Ngozi" (ibid.). The priest indicated that three people were seriously injured (ibid.). For his part, COSOME indicated that six people were injured and around 100 people were taken to Gahombo and Kayanza (COSOME 24 Oct. 2012). In addition, as of 24 October 2012, about 20 people were still detained (ibid.). According to Burundi National Radio Television (Radio télévision nationale du Burundi - RTNB), after this incident at the church, the public administration of the province of Kayanza decided during a security meeting held on 25 October [translation] "to prohibit the prayers conducted by Eusebie at her house in Gahombo commune" (25 Oct. 2012).

### **2.2 December 2012**

AFP indicates that Zebiya's group and police clashed in December 2012 and that a dozen followers were injured (AFP [2013]). According to COSOME, 36 Zebiya followers that participated in a clash with the police on 11 December in Businde were arrested and taken to the prison of the judicial police in Ngozi (COSOME 12 Dec. 2012). That day, one person reportedly died and dozens were injured, including a policeman (ibid.). The COSOME said that 6 people out of the 36 that were arrested and detained signed a declaration of disengagement before the General Attorney of the appeal court of Ngozi, stating that [translation] "they waive the monthly pilgrimage" in Businde (ibid.). In addition, and according to the General Attorney, [translation] "offenders to this act of commitment could be transferred to the central prison in Bujumbura for 'violating public order' and 'rebellion against the laws and regulations' in force in the country" (ibid.).

### **2.3 March 2013**

On 12 March 2013, a fight broke out between supporters and the police when the police tried to ban hundreds of followers from approaching the area where the cult was gathered (DPA 13 Mar. 2013; FIACAT 14 Mar. 2013; AFP 12 Mar. 2013). According to sources, the clash between Zebiya's followers and the police led to the death of either 6 people (ibid.), 7 people (CNIDH 13 Mar. 2013; DPA 13 Mar. 2013), 9 people (International Crisis Group 1 Apr. 2013; RFI 13 Apr. 2013) or 10 people (RFI 18 Mar. 2013; Afriqinfos 23 May 2013). Between 30 (FIACAT 14 Mar. 2013) and 50 people were also injured in this incident (RFI 13 Apr. 2013; DPA 13 Mar. 2013). According to the governor of Kayanza, "[t]he police ordered believers of the sect to leave the place but they started throwing stones on them, so the police opened fire" (qtd. in Reuters 12 Mar. 2013).

Radio France internationale pointed out that after the civil society qualified the incident as a [translation] "'massacre'," the government announced that some police officers had been arrested (18 Mar. 2013). In April 2013, International Crisis Group reported that three policemen were arrested (1 Apr. 2013).

### **2.4 March and April 2013**

According to RFI, around 40 of Zebiya's supporters were arrested on Easter in Businde's hill and sentenced to between 6 months' and 3 years' imprisonment (13 Apr. 2013).

Sources indicated that on 7 April 2013, the police disrupted the meeting of 72 Zebiya followers who were praying in a private house and arrested seven of them (RTNB 8 Apr. 2013; RPA 8 Apr. 2013). The RTNB reported that their cases were sent to the prosecuting authorities (RTNB 8 Apr. 2013).

According to media sources, on 12 April 2013, 182 Zebiya followers were sentenced to between six months' and five years' imprisonment (RFI 13 Apr. 2013; AFP 15 Apr. 2013), after "defying a ban to gather on a hilltop that has become a place of pilgrimage" (ibid.). RFI reported that [translation] "heavy penalties" were imposed by authorities to "make an example of them" (RFI 13 Apr. 2013). In addition, RFI said that the hearing was more [translation] "expedited" than the one that took place on Easter before the same jurisdiction (ibid.). Zebiya's followers were processed during five hours (AFP 15 Apr. 2013; RFI 13 Apr. 2013) without attorneys being present (ibid.). RFI also reported that high-ranking Burundian officials explained their determination in pursuing the Zebiya's followers by citing a decision of the Catholic Church of Burundi that "forbids any cult in Businde commune" (ibid.).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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