

Q&A with Lewis Mudge, HRW Rwanda Researcher – 09/22/2014, HRW office

In attendance: Matthew An, Pam Bruns, Kristin Ghazarians, Coralie Hentsch, Jessica Lynn, Callan Moor, Lewis Mudge, Tracy Navichoque, Ariam Negash, Chris Price and Amanda Samimi

Introducing Lewis Mudge

- Lewis Mudge is a researcher in the Africa Division at Human Rights Watch focusing on the Central African Republic (CAR), Rwanda and Burundi.
- Lewis studied Anthropology in university before joining the Peace Corps in Lesotho. He got his masters in African Politics from the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies.
- He has lived in Africa for 10 years, the last six of which have been focused on the Great Lakes region. Before joining Human Rights Watch, he was based in Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), as the field manager for Interactive Radio for Justice, training journalists to cover International Criminal Court proceedings.
- Since joining HRW in 2011, he has written several reports and his op-eds have appeared in major papers and news outlets.
- Lewis made the point he did not know HRW had a Student Task Force, and wishes he had had a similar opportunity (for human rights activism) when he was in high school.

What are the research situations like in Rwanda and Central African Republic (CAR)?

- General: Research days are spent negotiating his way into prisons and meeting with family members or ambassadors.
- Rwanda: Rwanda is a relatively modern country; roads are paved, there is electricity, cell service and access to internet. HRW has had an office in Rwanda since the late 1980s, however the organization is an official "enemy of the state" and our staff are called "terrorists" by the government because of our work. HRW research is focused on political issues such as illegal detention and space for journalists and civil society workers. One of the key goals of his work in Rwanda is to open up the space for discussion with these civil and political actors.
- CAR: The situation in CAR is generally difficult with serious issues like burning of villages, sexual violence, etc. Generally, trips to CAR are three weeks driving on bad roads and in difficult conditions, to go to dangerous places, negotiating with rebels, before arriving at the destination. There is limited access to food, comfort, and most often, security. HRW research is focused on the documentation of killings by all sides in the current conflict.

Q&A about Lewis's life as an HRW researcher

Q: How does your work compare to being a journalist?

- The working conditions are fairly different. We have more resources, satellite phones, staff, security supervisors, etc. Access to resources and security supervisors may be the key difference. With that said, I am followed often when in Rwanda but not in Burundi or DRC. I don't have many friends in Kigali who feel safe being out in the open with me because of my work.

Q: How do you get perpetrators to talk to you?

- It is not my job to cast judgment, instead I try to expose facts. When an official says they didn't do something bad, I can use the reports and facts to show them proof that these things really happened. Their answer will often be that they didn't know about it. Conversations are rarely difficult and usually end with them saying they will check into what is happening.

Q: When talking to a group of perpetrators, does the chain of command really work?

- It is usually possible to get in touch with the zone commander, even in a small community. This can absolve perpetrators who were "just following orders" and condemn a leader who may not have known what their subordinate was doing.

Q: When working on a report, what do you look for?

- We collect as much information, testimonies, etc. we can when conducting research. We make choices about the material to include. In the end, we use about 10-15% of our total research depending on where it leads us.

Lewis's upcoming report on illegal detention in Rwanda

- It is follow up to a 2006 report released on the same topic.
- Kigali is a very open and safe city. However, this is partially because police and government officials round up street children, vendors, sex workers, and others, and illegally detain them in detention centers. These centers are disgusting, dirty and violate several human rights. Lewis has filmed testimonies of people explaining their experiences and the conditions in the centers. The report launch is in the form of a radio and TV campaign to make the government feel uncomfortable. We'll raise awareness with the general public that will shed light on the ongoing human rights violations.

Q&A CAR, Rwanda and the Genocide

Q: What would you like students to know about the genocide?

- It is important to highlight that it happened only 20 years ago and that horrific violence continues to happen around the world. After the Holocaust it was unacceptable in 1994, and is crazy in 2014. To make it very simple, Tutsis were killed by Hutus. Sometimes we summarize it as a tribal conflict where Hutus didn't like Tutsis so they killed them, but it was really much more about politics. The Hutu regime found a way to gain power and blamed Tutsis for all the problems in the country. This was not about racial hatred but about power.

Q: What distinguishes the Rwandan genocide from other genocides in history?

- Its scale. This was the most efficient genocide in the history of humanity, especially since it was mostly done with machetes. About 800,000 people were killed in 3 months.

Q: Could anything have prevented the Rwandan genocide?

- UN Peacekeepers could have stopped the genocide at its beginning with 1,000 troops. The death of 10 Belgian peacekeepers at the start of the conflict signaled the withdrawal of Belgian, French and American troops, leaving the streets open for violence.
- Also, US action or support for the UN Peacekeeping Mission could have helped. In 1993, the US lost several soldiers in Somalia, which made Bill Clinton unwilling to send in troops to deal with "African" problems. American lack of response to the genocide is a lingering regret for the Clinton Administration.
- We seemed to have learned from the past. Last December alone, human rights workers saw hundreds of people killed in the streets of CAR. A UN mission was deemed too difficult to fund or man and HRW was told not to expect one. (HRW was advocating for it.) However, on September 15, 2014, the UN launched a peacekeeping mission in CAR. It is not an ideal solution, but for now it is the best solution and will help install a base level of security on the ground.

Q: Are there or were there any type of genocide reconciliation courts in Rwanda?

- These were held in villages with members of the community electing judges from the local population, most of whom had no legal training. Many judges were found to be corrupt and discrimination was rampant through the courts, which dealt with about one million cases. More often than not they were about revenge rather than reconciliation. There most likely won't be a return to ethnic violence, but there is still a lot to be done to keep moving toward reconciliation.

Q: Returning to the new UN Mission in CAR, do the African Union troops include Chadian soldiers? Will the UN Mission include them?

- No, there will not be any Chadian forces with the AU or UN Mission troops. Chad has been a main sponsor of rebel groups in the north. The Chadian peacekeepers also recently opened fire on civilians. These types of situations put peacekeeping missions in a difficult position and reflect a sense of impunity when governments don't punish troops that commit atrocities.

Q: Who decides how to release a HRW report? For example, who decided to release the upcoming Rwanda report with the “harder,” more public approach?

- The goal is not to be in the media, but to stop the human rights abuses. The government tolerates HRW because of foreign aid they receive for allowing humanitarian organizations to monitor the situation on the ground. Because HRW’s relationship with the government of Rwanda is difficult, we decided it would be better to reach out to the public to ask them to put pressure on their government. By using the public sphere, we are able to reach high level donors and expose questionable government activities, including funding militia groups in the DRC.

Q: How do you deal with the potential argument you’re bringing “Western values” to nonwestern cultures? How do you decide what’s a universal value?

- Calling something a “western” value is a cop-out for justifying human rights abuses. Just because someone says it’s “western” doesn’t make it so. Human rights are universal and know no political, cultural or social boundaries. Generally when this argument is used, we put the issue into cultural context, such as with child marriage or LGBTQ rights. It’s our job to remind people human rights are fundamental and universal, not “western.”

Advice for Student Task Force

- Young people can sometimes be more efficient when speaking to government or public officials by being very straight-forward and saying things like, “So your police are beating up people?”
- The number one country HRW writes about is the United States. If you are interested in what is done in the US, dive into it, start researching on issues and just try to get there in person.