

Petition to PM means everything to survivor

Rafe Arnott, The Times

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A local man spent months canvassing Abbotsford for a 3,000-name petition he sent to Stephen Harper urging the prime minister to publicly condemn the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF).

Signatories want Harper to endorse a Spanish court ruling calling for arrests of RPF members and create a commission of inquiry for aid workers and civilians persecuted by the RPF. The group - whose members have been accused of murder, torture and rape - has members in the current Rwandan government.

Jean de Dieu Hakizimana, himself a political refugee from Rwanda, whose family was murdered by death squads there, said the idea behind the petition was to "shed light on the atrocities" committed by Rwandan military commanders who are still in power.



Jean de Dieu Hakizimana of Abbotsford feels the passion to spread his personal message about violence in Rwanda. He canvassing locals for a petition he'll send to Prime Minister Stephen Harper, asking him to condemn the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF).

In February 2008, Fernando Andreu Merelies, a Spanish Supreme Court justice, issued international arrest warrants for 40 RPF officials accused of mass killings following the 1994 Rwandan genocide, a fact Hakizimana said lends weight to the request for the commission.

In January, Hakizimana said he received a phone call from the PM's office telling him that Harper was looking into the issues and took the petition and its request seriously.

PMO correspondence executive L.A. Lavelle said in a letter dated Feb. 3, 2009, that, "The Right Hon. Stephen Harper has left the issues to the Hon. Lawrence Cannon, Minister of Foreign Affairs," and would be getting back to him when a resolution on the matter had been reached.

Hakizimana was arrested in 1995 in Rwanda as a spy (for qualifying for U.S. aid to run an educational centre for Rwandan youth) and rounded up with hundreds of other individuals, many - according to Hakizimana - on "trumped-up" charges.

"When I was in the military camp, I saw how [the RPF] treated those prisoners - how they killed them - I know what they did. Because I was waiting to be killed as well." © Abbotsford Times 2009