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CEO of the Ishami Foundation

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OPEN LETTER TO THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF THE BBC:

BBC insistence on incorrect genocide terminology erodes trust in Rwanda

Dear Lord Tony Hall,

BBC SPORTAFRICA this week aired a special issue devoted to my story of surviving the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. In it I talk about how football saved my life and show how I've gone on to use sport and storytelling to build peace through my charity, the Ishami Foundation. The story is beautifully filmed and sensitively told: the collaborative nature of the project is evident.

However, despite us having been clear throughout the process that using the correct terminology to describe the genocide – “the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda” – was essential for myself and the other Rwandans who appear in the film, this week the programme was aired with the incorrect wording the “Rwandan genocide”. This decision ignores the wishes of survivors, the Rwandan government and the UN, who in 2018 agreed to adopt the terminology “the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda”. The main reasons for the change in wording are to avoid ambiguity about the group that was targeted and to combat genocide denial. “Rwandan genocide” is a term which can offend survivors because it has become associated with negationism and disproved theories about a double genocide.

As you are no doubt aware, the BBC is only just beginning to rebuild trust in Rwanda following the airing of “Rwanda: The Untold Story” – a documentary that was widely condemned by academics and the Rwandan community for repeating these disproved theories about a double genocide and giving a platform to discredited researchers to repeat misinformation about the scale of the genocide against the Tutsi. Because of the way “Rwanda: the Untold Story” misled Rwandan contributors and encouraged denial, the Rwandan government has been very cautious about granting media permits to the BBC to record in Rwanda. As part of the filming authorisation for the SPORTAFRICA programme the BBC agreed that the government department responsible for genocide prevention, CNLG, would be shown a final version of the programme. This was indeed the case. However, the BBC shared a version of the film with the correct terminology with both CNLG and myself before then going on to broadcast a different version with incorrect wording. This appears to be a deliberate betrayal of trust and a breach of Article 3 of the contract signed between

CNLG and the representatives of the BBC who travelled with me to Rwanda to film. The article is about obligations of each party and it clearly states that the BBC must respect the following key points:

1. Respect the sensitive nature of Genocide memorial
2. Provide CNLG with an advanced copy of film, at least three weeks prior to its launch and awaiting comments from CNLG before its launch
3. Use the terminology “The 1994 Genocide against Tutsi in Rwanda” as stated by UN General Assembly Resolution A/72/L.31

I also requested that the BBC use the ‘over a million lives lost’ wording which corresponds to the new figures from research conducted by the Rwandan Ministry of Local Government in 2002. This research found that 1,074,017 people were killed during the Genocide, of whom 93.7% were Tutsi. The producers declined on the grounds that use of the 800,000 figure is a BBC policy. This is a disappointment for survivors who feel that Rwandan-led research and the ongoing discovery of new mass graves over the past 26 years merits revisiting this policy. However, we understand that statistics are controversial. Naming the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, however, is clear cut – both Rwanda and the UN supported the change in terminology and not to follow this lead is insulting. I and the other survivors in an otherwise important film find this lack of regard for Rwandan wishes to be upsetting and disappointing.

I am very grateful that the BBC provided me with such an important platform to share my story, raise awareness of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, and talk about the work I am doing with the Ishami Foundation bringing people together to build social cohesion through sport and storytelling. However, I also feel that the BBC failed us by refusing to understand the importance and significance of using the correct wording for the genocide that took the lives of so many of my family members.

If a respected and influential institution like the BBC is not able to treat genocide with seriousness and care for survivors’ wishes, how can we expect the ordinary man and woman on the street to do so?

Your sincerely,



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CEO of the Ishami Foundation