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Kenya Research project by Robert M. Press [see: Press, Robert M. (2006) *Peaceful Resistance: Advancing Human Rights and Civil Liberties*. Aldershot, U. K.: Ashgate.

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Interview conducted and recorded by Robert M. Press (bob.press@usm.edu; press.bob@gmail.com)

Location of interview: Nairobi, Kenya; in interviewee's home. The interview took place on the covered front porch of the Kinuthia home, where she was living with her son, Rumba. From the front yard, one can see the state maximum security prison where he her son was held in detention after being tortured.

Date of interview: Oct 12, 2002.

Interviewee: Micah Wanjiku Kinuthia, mother of Rumba Kinuthia (human rights attorney and activist in Kenya also interviewed; he was detained and tortured by the government. His mother was one of a dozen or so women who staged a public protest in a downtown park in Nairobi to demand release of their sons who were being held as political prisoners and, the mothers feared, possible execution. After a few days, police broke up the protest, but the mothers retreated to a nearby church and continued their protest there for one year, ultimately winning the release of all but one of the prisoners.

Note: BP =interviewer (Bob Press); MK = interviewee: Milcah Wanjiku Kinuthia. The interview was tape recorded. Some bracketed research notes by the author are included and a tape counter number. The ?? indicates uncertainty about the spelling of a name.

BP Were you afraid that the government, the police would come and attack you [during the mothers' protest].

[TACTIC – mother's strike; no fear.]

MK No, I was not at all afraid.

BP The police have a lot of power. You said you weren't afraid.

MK What can I be afraid of when my son had been locked up?

BP Where did you get this idea to come help your son?

MK I decided to go there because I felt my son would be hanged.

BP Where were you when you got the news that your son might be hanged?

MK I was at home

BP When did you decide to go to Nairobi?

MK Immediately

BP Your son was arrested in 1990; the strike was in 1992. Why did you choose that time to make a strike?

MK We wanted to show how the government had ruined our sons.

BP Why did you wait until 1992 if your sons were arrested in 1990?

MK So that the government could release the sons.

{Rumba aids in the translation}

MK I went looking for Koigi's mothers and the other mothers and that is when we came out with the plan to come to Nairobi.

BP Were you the first mother who started looking for the mothers?

[Individual action: she starts the process leading to the strike]

MK I am the one who was looking for the others so we could form a group.

BP What was your plan? You found the mothers...and then did you have a plan or sit down to just talk?

MK The mothers of the sons who were arrested came together so we could have a plan to go demonstrate.

BP Where did you hold that first meeting?

MK We met with the mother of Koigi in Nakuru – at my home. [others attending included: Mirugi's mother – **At that time we were three**

{Rumba takes over as translator}

[TACTIC: Negotiate with the government]

MK We went to Nairobi and went to Mr. Wako's office [Amos Wako was Attorney General]. We went to Mr. Wako's office after setting ourselves up at Freedom Corner in Uhuru Park. Then after we came from Mr. Wako's office, we were attacked by the police.

BP Whose idea was it to go to see Wako?

MK It was a joint decision between me, Mama Mirugi and Mama Koigi.

BP Did you have a discussion with Mr. Wako?

MK Yes, we talked with Wako. He said the government would have to make a decision on the matter.

BP What did you tell Mr. Wako?

MK We went and told Mr. Wako that we were camped at Freedom Corner and we wanted to find out why our sons had been arrested [two years earlier].

BP Do you remember what he said?

MK He said he wanted to consult with the government first.

BP Tell me your story about ‘camping’ at the park.

[Govt. TACTIC: remove protestors; send them home]

MK We were in a big group when we went to Mr. Wako’s office, including Margaret [Kinuthia] and the mothers. After that meeting with Wako we were attacked on the same day. We were then taken in motor vehicles and we were all transported to our various homes.

BP Did the police hit you?

MK They did not beat us. They just asked each of us where our homes were.

BP Did you take your clothing off?

[TACTIC – cultural curse: stripping]

MK Yes[but is this yes for hearing my question, or a yes of participation; best to assume she did not strip], at the Freedom Corner, some of the women removed all their clothes when they were attacked.

BP What does that mean?

MK That is a curse, a way of cursing those people...the President and the people who had imprisoned our sons unfairly.

[Rumba said here that he was charged with treason...transporting guns and ammunition from a foreign country and we were preparing to launch guerilla warfare with Koigi, Mirugi – there was my brother and one called Harold Ndungu Kafa??; Edwing Murithi?? Geoffrey Kuria Kariuki?? a cousin or nephew of Koigi, and also Margaret Wangui Kinuthia (his sister), also Mary Waruli??

BP. Were the charges true?

RK No, they were trumped up charges.]

BP When the police came, were you afraid? They were coming in with sticks.

[Not afraid of police]

MK We were not afraid because we were expecting that to happen.

BP I understand you were then taken to your home?

MK We were taken to our homes and then the following day we came back to Nairobi on our own and we went to the [All Saints] Cathedral [an Anglican church??] where we were given shelter.

BP Why did you come back?

MK We came back because our sons had not been released.. We went back to Wako's office – in a large group, which included Wangari Maathai And when we asked Wako to take us to the President, he declined. Wangari Maathai helped us a great deal. She used to sleep with us on the concrete floor. We were not comfortable because we were sleeping on the concrete, but we had a lot of support from people

[from here on I eliminate most of my questions and combine her remarks as a narration.]

We were on a hunger strike for almost one month, and we were only taking juices. It was very difficult because some of us used to fall sick. I myself fell sick and I was taken to the hospital. I stayed for four days in the hospital. Then I went back to the church (both the mother and son laugh).

[TACTIC: civil disobedience (against GSU)]

We went back to Wako and told him again we wanted to be taken to the President. He refused. He refused and then later on the General Services Unit (GSU) came in about five lorries and surrounded the place (All Saints Cathedral). We were ordered to open; we refused. There is a lady called Njeri [Kababere] who we sent to talk to them. She told them that these women have refused to talk to [the paramilitary force], so you should just go away.

Their leader pleaded with us saying please, just open for us; your sons are going to be released. They were pleading with Mama Koigi but I told her not to get up from where she was lying. Also, those personnel, GSU, spent the night there, outside. The following morning they called the Pastor, the Provost, Njenga. Njenga asked him to plead with the women to open up. He said he could not do that; he said you have to go talk to the women themselves.

[Cultural curse? Pastor plants a stick; GSU back off]

He planted the stick he was holding. And they [GSU] said he had been bewitched, like by a sorcerer. It was an ordinary stick, but they believed when he planted it he had used some black magic against them. They got back into their vehicles and drove off. They

were also alleging we had a bomb inside the [church] bunker [basement]. They said we were coming to remove the bomb.

BP Did you have a bomb?

MK (she and her son laugh). Where would we get a bomb. We don't even know how to use one (she and her son laugh)

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[Tactic: legal action against Moi]

We decided to take Moi to court. It was me who filed the case against Moi. In court I was asked why I had filed a suit against President Moi. When they heard about that case they brought in about six judges. I was asked why have you people filed a suit against the President. I said Moi says he loves children. Supposing it was his son locked up; would he be comfortable or happy.

[Meeting the President]

After that we made arrangements and went to State House. We were five [in addition to her?]. We met the President and Wako was present. Moi asked us why we had come to State House. We said we came here because we have been camping at the Cathedral and we had asked to come here but up till now, no one has agreed to bring us.

[IMPACT – Moi releases the political prison]

He [Moi]asked us who we had seen and we told him we had gone to see Wako, who was here. Wako was asked: why didn't you bring them. He said I had reported the matter but it was not possible to bring them. One person would speak and then the other would speak, the six of us. He asked each of us who is your son; and then each would say [the name of their son.]. He said we should go to the press and inform them that this was not a secret visit. And he called for some tea for us to take. We took tea and then he told us we must take a photograph with him – and he was going to release our sons.

During the second day of the case we had filed against Moi, I was asked if I was married. I told them I was married and I had three children. We were told to come back the following day at 9 am [to court]. The six judges again appeared on that day. They told us: go home, that the matter was now in Wako's hands. We were told to go home to our homes. We refused, saying, our sons had not been released as yet. Later on we heard our sons were going to be released. When we had gone to visit Rumba in the hospital, we were told they are going to be released. We were with Margaret ; one of the prison guards told us these people are going to be released.

RK Said he knew immediately that his mother was on a strike. He was informed by the prison wardens.

BP Your mother did all this for you; how do you feel about that?

RK I feel that she played a very major role in saving me from that imprisonment and possible execution if the case had gone on. There was no justice. The justice system had ground to a halt and the President could order anyone to be executed...

BP Margaret, your sister was also out there, got beat up. How do you feel about her contribution?

RK Ah, it was also very valuable. She played a very major role and I've always been extremely grateful to them for the sacrifices they made on my behalf, for me and my brother – and the other political prisoners.

BP (to the mother again) You went to the hospital; then what happened?

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MK Margaret left suddenly and left me in the hospital. She went to check whether it was true that they were being released. And then I followed... We found very many vehicles waiting for us [at All Saints Cathedral]. We were taken home by a motorcade of white people who had sympathized with us. They didn't know Swahili but they were trying to tell us our sons would be released. And they drove us all the way to Kamiti. The people were told to move away from our group when we went to Kamiti. Then some of them were released. [names several] Five of them were released. We were told Rumba was not going to be released – that he went for a medical checkup. These other three – were later released on their own, six months later. [and Rumba??] But after six months, the three were released –Rumba, Mirugi and Koigi. [Meanwhile] we stayed at the Cathedral.

End side A, tape one of one

Begin side B, tape one of one

MK The mothers, including those of prisoners who had been released, were still with us. We were more than ten. [I visited them from time to time in their “bunker” in the basement of the All Saints Cathedral and usually saw about this number of mothers]. We waited until they had been released and then we dispersed. I saw him on the same day that he was released. He was brought to the Cathedral [as Mrs. Wamwere asked of Koigi, who came]. We were congregated outside [the church]. We were a huge number. He came from a vehicle and addressed the large number of people gathered there. They addressed the people there- Koigi and Mirugi. Before Rumba spoke, I embraced him first (laughs): I was very, very happy. I said: “**My child, you are back.**” I was extremely happy.

Then he went back to the hospital because he was still unwell. Later on we went to the hospital. Once they had released them we were happy and went to our homes [was Rumba the last out??]. People brought us many things and we had a big celebration.

BP How did you feel?

RK Exhilarated, though I was still unwell. I was suffering from high blood pressure and chronic tonsillitis. I had an operation immediately after release – after the celebration.

BP Was the high blood pressure related to your detention?

RK Yes; it came about during my detention. And even the chronic tonsillitis was [due to] unhygienic conditions [in prison].

BP You are a wonderful lady. A good mother. Mama nzuri [Swahili for “good.”]

MK My poor children had been grabbed by Moi, and I was very annoyed. (everyone, including Mama Kinuthia, laughs).

BP Never underestimate the power of an annoyed woman.

MK (uncertain translation by another person)... “I’d go to the prison cell with my children...

(clear translation by Rumba: People brought us a lot of gifts.

BP When a government does something bad, what can people do?

MK Even though I speak broken Swahili, I would have to talk to the government to correct the wrongs they are doing.

TACTIC – group formed (Release Political Prisoners: RPP)

We formed a group to fight for freedom of political prisoners. We decided before we left [Nakuru] that the group should be formed for fighting for the release of prisoners. The group is still in existence up until now [Release Political Prisoners]. It was started by us, the mothers of political prisoners.

BP [omitting many of my questions] Did Njeri Kababere help you?

MK Yes. She’s still a member of RPP. [Later she joined Safina and later worked for Amnesty]

BP Were politicians [in the opposition] supporting your strike?

MK Yes. They gave us a lot of support. They are the ones who used to bring us food. When we ended the hunger strike they are the ones who used to bring us food and juice. I don’t know if I can remember their names. One of them is [names one I don’t recognize] Many came, including Kabaki. [Rev.] Njoya used to come (emphasis). He was assisting us and also carrying out the prayers for us. We had also many white people who came to support us and sympathize with us; they also used to give us money for upkeep.

BP Did Rev. Njoya tell the women to take their clothes off when the police came [He told me this.]

MK No, it was not him.

BP Did he tell you this in advance, as a tactic [stripping]

MK Njoya could not suggest such a thing because he is a preacher. He just used to come for prayers.

BP Are you still annoyed with President Moi?

MK I'm not happy, even now. I'm still unhappy with him because there was no reason for that imprisonment.

BP I had heard that almost fifty prisoners were released. Is that true?

MK There were 52.

BP I also heard that within a year, maybe two years later there were that many prisoners again.

MK Yes, its true. They were there. [The state described them as criminals]

BP Do you have anything else you want to tell about this very, very important story?

MK We were told by the visiting white people who used to come and see us that we should not abandon that issue of fighting for political prisoners. Even if they are released, we should continue. And that is why we formed the RPP. I'm still active. We still go there to find out what is going on. We have to still fight for political prisoners.

*BP What if he gets arrested again; what are you going to do?

MK (emphasis; loudly) I'll go there [to the prison] and demand from the government whether he [my son] has killed somebody or whether he has robbed. (soft laugh by the mother)

BP So you would go back and defend him again.

MK (same strong emphasis). I'd go back there – straight to the government.

BP You didn't fear the government, did you?

[TACTIC: chained themselves together]

MK (emphasis). We were not fearing [the government] at all. We used to tell us to put us in the prison truck instead of putting in our sons because our sons look after us. [she snaps out the words with emphasis, laughing softly] Then they would persuade us not to get into the truck. We did not get in . **We also chained ourselves to each other.** The police used to stop the traffic when we crossed the road because we were chained together (laughs at recalling the scene).

[Struggle continues]

You should make an appeal [in the United States] for them to be assisted. We need assistance so we can fight for other political prisoners. Some of the foreigners have been very active. People have to come together and elect – people who can assist. It was a bad government, though it was elected. If it was a good government it would not have done these things, including killing one person; a young man in Nakuru. He was a member of the group that was in prison.

We were aware that it was an important thing [the strike]. We were also aware that they would not have been released if it had not been for our activities. People have to come together and talk about the prisons and such other oppressive institutions because people are tortured and killed in our prisons.

BP Do you think people can change bad governments; ordinary people, not Parliament, not judges, but ordinary people?

MK They can. Because they can elect people who have the interests of the people at heart. The ones who are in power have failed.

[end of interview with Mama Kinuthia]

[interview with sister of Rumba Kinuthia was transcribed separately.]