

## **Accountability Statement and Apology from NOII-Van Re: Refugees Welcome Event**

We offer our unequivocal and sincerest public apology for the harm, violence, pain and trauma/re-trauma our (in)actions caused to two Rwandan women in attendance \* at a NOII event - including and especially an elder woman survivor who was assaulted, to members of Vancouver and Canada's Rwandan community, and to others in broader community.

At an event on Oct 11, 2015 featuring all refugee voices hosted by No One Is Illegal - Vancouver Coast Salish Territories, we invited Jean de Dieu Hakizimana to speak.

We know this speaker as a translator for refugees and permanent residents in a human rights case against a treeplanting company and through a free legal clinic for African residents of the Downtown Eastside that he set up. He also organized a vigil for Abdi Gani Mahamud Hirsi who was killed by police in the DTES that he reached out to us and several organizations to support.

However, our lack of accountable and meaningful relationships with the Rwandan community meant that we did not meaningfully engage or consult with others prior to inviting him to speak. We did not know concerns until the night before through facebook posts on the event page, and our ignorance represents our own lack of meaningful connections. This made the decision to invite him tokenistic on our part, which led to a series of harms during the event - particularly an assault of an elder woman - that furthered the historical and ongoing trauma of genocide survivors.

As we were cleaning up after the event, two refugee women organizers within NOII were approached by two refugee women from the Rwandan community. They were expressing their disappointment and anger about Jean speaking, when Jean also approached and in very rapid escalation ultimately assaulted an elderly woman. Those two organizers asked Jean to leave immediately. When he tried to explain himself to them, they reiterated that he needed to leave and he was escorted off the premises by two other members of the collective. Shortly after we were asked to call the police by the elder woman who was struck. We made the call and all collective members present remained during and after the police investigation as support for several hours, while acknowledging and apologizing for our role as organizers and asking about ongoing ways to support.

We recognize this was the least we could do in the moment and was inadequate to address all that had already transpired, and that had created the conditions for this violence to occur. We also decided on the spot to delete the Facebook event page, in part, to protect the identity of those in attendance who did not want to deal with law enforcement. We apologize for cutting off this forum for communication. We also apologize for organizing an event that was ad-hoc with limited capacity that meant we did not pay adequate attention to practices that

we often take seriously including logistical considerations such as having enough time for discussion and prioritizing various access and safety needs. We recognize that everything that transpired at the event is our ultimately our responsibility as organizers.

Over the past month, we have attempted to be accountable for our actions and thoughtful about what allowed for this to transpire. The incident and everything underlying it has been one of our primary focuses at present as well as our conversations about our commitments into the future as an all-volunteer group. Our public response was delayed as a result of our intention to not respond immediately, defensively or simply with words. We wanted to take time to reflect on the situation and our actions, reach out to those impacted at the event, and take initial concrete actions towards accountability. We do regret that this delay has caused more harm.

Specifically, we have been in touch with two Rwandan women who attended the event to ask them about immediate and ongoing follow up and accountability. (We also recognize that the burden for this does not and cannot rest on them solely.) A primary request has been to not invite the speaker to future NOII events. We have undergone an internal discussion that was communicated to Jean to let him know that the violence he perpetrated against an elder woman is completely unacceptable and to inform him that he is not welcome at future NOII events. We have been in touch with one of the organizations that the speaker is connected to and advised them of what transpired and the assault.

More fundamentally, we recognize that it is our lack of deep, meaningful and accountable relationships in the Rwandan community that allowed this to transpire. The fact that something like this occurred at an event we organized clearly demonstrates our lack of meaningful relationships and accountability with the communities harmed and (re)traumatized by our actions. We are also committed to learning more and taking responsibility to educating ourselves about genocidal violence as well as genocide negation in Rwanda specifically, and elsewhere, through our own self-education as well as direct learnings from those with lived experiences. We acknowledge this is a systemic problem and are also committed to ongoing processes to address this. We and the migrant justice movement generally has failed to center African refugee and migrant voices and experiences in our organizing and this perpetuates entwined anti-Black racism. Addressing this - through critical reflection and meaningful actions - has become a priority within the collective, but should have been a priority earlier.

We are committed to recognizing and amending our wrongs and the ways in which we have broken trust. We also want to recognize and thank everyone for the immense time and labour that has gone into dialoguing with and challenging us. This has been a big lesson in aiming to be accountable to and supportive towards diverse refugee and migrant communities and striving to be transparent and humble when called on to be accountable and to address our wrongs. We

know we could have and should have done more and better to be ethical, responsive and accountable to not fall so short on our commitments.

We would like to close by again offering our unequivocal and sincerest public apology for the harm, violence, pain and trauma/re-trauma our (in)actions caused to members of Vancouver and Canada's Rwandan community including and especially two Rwandan women in attendance, and to those in broader community.

For anyone wishing to discuss this further we can be reached via phone through 778-322-5349 (Sozan) or email through [noi-van@resist.ca](mailto:noi-van@resist.ca)

\* We have not included the names of two Rwandan women in attendance since we do not have their explicit consent to do so in this context.