

## The Rwanda Genocide

### Historical roots

Rwanda has been called 'a tropical Switzerland in the heart of Africa'. It's about a third the size of Belgium, who administered it from 1919 under a League of Nations mandate (by which it ceased to be part of German East Africa) until independence in 1962. Visitors think it's a beautiful country. ('Beautiful?' said one Rwandan. 'After the things that have happened here?')

Most of the Rwandan population belong to the Hutu ethnic group, traditionally crop-growers. For many centuries Rwanda attracted Tutsis - traditionally herdsmen - from northern Africa. For 600 years the two groups shared the business of farming, essential for survival, between them. They have also shared their language, their culture, and their nationality. There has been much intermarriage.

Because of the nature of their historical pastoral or agricultural roles, Tutsis tended to be landowners and Hutus the people who worked the land; and this division of labor perpetuated a population balance in which Hutus naturally outnumbered Tutsis. A wedge was driven between them when the European colonists moved in. **It was the practice of colonial administrators to select a group to be privileged and educated 'intermediaries' between governors and governed. The Belgians chose the Tutsis: landowners, tall, and to European eyes the more aristocratic in appearance.** This thoughtless introduction of class consciousness unsettled the stability of Rwandan society. Some Tutsis began to behave like aristocrats, and the Hutu to feel treated like peasants. An alien political divide was born.

European colonial powers also introduced modern weapons and modern methods of waging war. Missionaries, too, came from Europe, bringing a new political twist: **the church taught the Hutu to see themselves as oppressed, and so helped to inspire revolution.** With the European example before them, and European backing behind them, it was armed resistance that the Hutus chose. In 1956 their rebellion began (it would cost over 100,000 lives). By 1959 they had seized power and were stripping Tutsi communities of their lands. Many Tutsis retreated to exile in neighboring countries, where they formed the Front Patriotique Rwandais, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), trained their soldiers, and waited.

After their first delight in gaining power - and, in 1962, independence for Rwanda - a politically inexperienced Hutu government began to face internal conflicts as well. Tensions grew between communities and provincial factions. Tutsi resistance was continually nurtured by repressive measures against them (in 1973, for example, they were excluded from secondary schools and the university). **In 1990 RPF rebels seized the moment and attacked: civil war began.**

### A genocide begins

A ceasefire was achieved in 1993, followed by UN-backed efforts to negotiate a new multi-party constitution; but Hutu leaders and extremists fiercely opposed any Tutsi involvement in government. On April 6 1994 the plane carrying Rwanda's president was shot down, almost certainly the work of an extremist. This was the trigger needed for the Hutus' planned 'Final Solution' to go into operation. The Tutsis were accused of killing the president, and Hutu civilians were told, by radio and word of mouth, that it was their duty to wipe the Tutsis out. First, though, moderate Hutus who weren't anti-Tutsi should be killed. So should Tutsi wives or husbands. Genocide began.

**Up to a million people died** before the RPF (some of whose personnel are Hutu) was able to take full control. Unlike the instigators of the killings of Armenians in 1915, and of Jews and Roma in 1941-5, no-one tried to keep the genocide in Rwanda a secret. Journalists and television cameras reported what they saw, or what they found when the genocide was over. There was even a UN force (UNAMIR) in place, monitoring

the ceasefire and now obliged to watch as people were killed in the street by grenades, guns and machetes. ('We have no mandate to intervene.' UNAMIR did their best to protect trapped foreigners, until they were pulled out of Rwanda altogether.) **But the genocide organizers were conscious of the risks of international scrutiny:** over the radio the killers were constantly incited to continue, but 'No more corpses on the roads, please'. Corpses in the countryside were covered with banana leaves to screen them from aerial photography.

Although on a large scale, this genocide was carried out entirely by hand, often using machetes and clubs. The men who'd been trained to massacre were members of civilian death squads, the Interahamwe ('those who fight together'). Transport and fuel supplies were laid on for the Interahamwe - even remote areas were catered for. Where the killers encountered opposition, the Army backed them up with manpower and weapons. The State provided Hutu Power's supporting organization; politicians, officials, intellectuals and professional soldiers deliberately incited (and where necessary bribed) the killers to do their work.

Local officials assisted in rounding up victims and making suitable places available for their slaughter. Tutsi men, women, children and babies were killed in thousands in schools. They were also killed in churches: some clergy colluded in the crime. The victims, in their last moments alive, were also faced by another appalling fact: their cold-blooded killers were people they knew - neighbors, work-mates, former friends, sometimes even relatives through marriage. Even aid agencies were helpless; having let into compound or hospital people injured or in flight, they were forced to leave them there. Few survived.

Cold blood, with a shot of motivating fear, was what the planners wanted: the Interahamwe weren't fuelled by drink, drugs or mindless violence, but by fanatic dedication to a political cause. There were indeed people stoked-up on drink or hysteria or a manic wish to show they were 'on the right side' ; but when these mavericks began to join in and kill on whim, local administrators called for police assistance: such 'disorderly elements' might derail the genocide program.

The definition of 'genocide' was an international sticking-point. **There'd been at least 10 clear warnings to the UN of the 'Hutu power' action**, including an anxious telegram from the UNAMIR commander to the then UN Secretary- General (Boutros Boutros Ghali) three months before the event. The UN Security Council met in secret after the start of the violence. At this meeting Britain urged that UNAMIR should pull out (and later blocked an American proposal to send in a fact-finding mission when the death toll had reached six figures). Council members resisted admitting 'that the mass murder being pursued in front of the global media was in fact genocide': genocide involved action no-one wanted to take. Once it was inescapably clear that genocide was indeed going on, it was too late. (The USA had actually banned its officials from using the term. Finally, in June, Secretary of State Warren Christopher grumpily conceded 'If there's any particular magic in calling it genocide, I've no hesitancy in saying that'.)

The USA, asked to send 50 armored personnel carriers to help UNAMIR save what and whom it could before its departure, marked time and then sent the APCs to Uganda. **Asked to use its hi-tech skills to get the génocidaire radio off the air, America replied, 'the traditional US commitment to free speech cannot be reconciled with such a measure', on this occasion.** France, a backer of most French-speaking African governments, had been backing the genocidal government: it was one of their generals who advised the Hutus to 'improve their image' (hence, perhaps, the order to keep corpses out of the sight of cameras).

Around 2m Hutu perpetrators, their families and supporters, and anyone else who feared reprisals, even simply for being Hutu, fled over the borders, at least half of them to Congo (then called Zaire). At first it wasn't hard to find Hutu men in the Zaire refugee camps who admitted to their part in the killings, or even boasted of it. But within a year they'd realized such admissions were risky. By the end of 1995 it was hard to find anyone who would admit there'd been a genocide at all. Civil war, yes; some massacres, possibly; but no

genocide.

In the West, events in Rwanda were presented as 'tribal violence', 'ancient ethnic hatreds', 'breakdown of existing ceasefire', or a 'failed State'. No-one seemed able to accept that deliberate extermination had been carried out for political reasons, to hold and keep power - a process that had been used before elsewhere and could be recognized. In fact the genocide wasn't over yet.

### After the genocide

For a time the Hutus found that exile in the Congo camps, run and stocked by aid agencies, was tolerable. Hutu Power extremists there had time and opportunity to set up a new power base, recruit new militias, make new plans. Aid workers could not and would not separate those involved in the massacres from innocent refugees. This angered the new Tutsi-led government in Rwanda, who wanted to bring the guilty to trial. Congo, too, wanted to clear the camps; in 1996 the refugees were forced out. Many returned home - a long and ragged procession, watched in profound silence by Rwandan Tutsis as it crossed the border - but others continued a nomadic, fugitive existence in Congo, especially harsh for the many Hutu women and children with nowhere to go.

The government of Rwanda surprised everyone by declaring a moratorium on arrests of suspected génocidaires. This was a practical move aimed at dealing with an impossible situation; like all such solutions, it was both well-intentioned and double-edged. Nearly a million suspects were already in prison awaiting trial; thousands more - the most wanted - were known to be among the returning refugees, still eager to fight for the Hutu cause.

No-one expected, either, the speed with which the prevailing génocidaire mind-set seemed to be displaced by the government's order to resume communal life. Only two years after the genocide, killers and survivors found themselves living side by side - sometimes, for lack of choice, in the same house. Radio stations broadcast exhortations once more; but this time Rwandans were urged to welcome the returnees as brothers and sisters. The new President's message was endlessly repeated: **'The Rwandan people were able to live together peacefully for six hundred years and there is no reason why they can't live together in peace again. Let me appeal to those who have chosen the murderous and confrontational path, by reminding them that they, too, are Rwandans: abandon your genocidal and destructive ways, join hands with other Rwandans, and put that energy to better use.'**

Vice-President Paul Kagame said: 'People can be changed. Some people can even benefit from being forgiven, from being given another chance.' There were and are people in Rwanda capable of forgiving: for example, the survivors among those who in 1994 had helped others to escape, saving lives at the risk of their own. One particular group - orphaned girls - has shown a particular readiness to forgive, in the interests of the future. But there are also survivors, impoverished and scarred, who are being asked for tolerance but not given the moral, psychological and practical support they need. 'We were beginning to forget, but now the wound is opened again.'

For some génocidaires freedom has meant another chance to kill: they have sustained Hutu-Tutsi confrontation in Rwanda's northern hills, and across its borders (where the RPF's army had got caught up in the Congo conflict). In the months after the genocide they also murdered many of the witnesses whose evidence could have convicted them. For many of the remaining Interahamwe war is their only skill, their only available way of life, their only escape from punishment. For some the political struggle is still on.

An International War Crimes Tribunal has been set up in Arusha, Tanzania, to try leaders of the genocide. At this tribunal the former prime minister of Rwanda confessed to genocide and conspiracy to commit it, and by

2001 a few more people had been tried and convicted (no death sentences can be given). Nearly 50 high ranking Hutu men still await trial. **The court has also established that rape is a tool of genocide.** In Rwanda itself local courts have tried several thousand cases; there have been 400 death sentences (intended as 'a lesson'. At the end of 2001 around 125,000 prisoners, crammed into desperately overcrowded jails, still remained to be tried. To ease the situation there is a move to revive and revise a traditional law by which people are tried in their own communities.

### **The Failure of the International Community**

The present UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, commissioned an independent report to look into UN failures during the genocide. It was published in December 1999. It condemned the UN leadership for ignoring the evidence that a slaughter was planned, for failing to act when the killing began, and for removing the UN staff and so abandoning the victims when they most needed help. The report also criticized the USA and other major powers for 'deplorable inaction' and a 'lack of political commitment'. Kofi Annan responded by admitting a 'systematic failure', and his own deep remorse.

### **Witnesses**

*'The river Kagera flows into a steep ravine that forms the natural border between Tanzania and Rwanda. There is a small waterfall where the river narrows before entering the gorge. In the rainy season the river swells. As it sweeps down from the highlands, it gathers into its currents huge clumps of elephant grass and numerous small trees. In the late spring of 1994 it was much the same with human corpses. They, too, twisted and turned, rose and dropped and came bouncing over the falls before they found the still water which would carry them down to Lake Victoria. They did not look dead. They looked like swimmers, because the strong currents invested them with powers of movement. So lifelike did they appear that for a few moments I winced as I watched them thrown against the rocks, imagining the pain they must be feeling. It was only beyond the falls, where they floated lifeless among the trees and grass, that one could accept the certainty of death. The border guards told me people had been floating through in their hundreds, every day for weeks. Many had their hands tied behind their backs. They had been shot, hacked, clubbed, burned, drowned.'*

*'Those victims who escaped death carry on as best they can, often not very well. What they say today is what they said yesterday and what they will go on saying: for them time came to a halt and they can find no peace of mind. They complain that they have been abandoned. They are the ones who have to face all the grievances, sometimes compassion, sometimes others' shame for what they have done. At first sight they seem to be enclosed in a silence so profound it's frightening. Then sometimes, just a word, just a look, just a few moments' wait will turn a victim into an eyewitness. In a feeble but clear monotone they will tell you, as they stare at the ground, how they escaped the worst fate; they're alive, they're lucky. And one of the first things they tell you is that they are one of those whom death refused. Then they describe what they witnessed, acts of unbearable horror.'*

*'In the schoolrooms and church halls where they were slaughtered, many of the dead have been left unburied, to form their own memorial. The rooms are empty except for trestle tables on which collected bodies and bones have been laid, entangled. In one room the faded, shapeless clothes of the dead have been strung on motionless lines: curiously beautiful. In another it's the floor that supports the barely recognizable decomposed remains, lost in a sleep more fast than most of us get to know. There is no smell, there are no flies. The atmosphere is, in fact, intensely peaceful; the scene is deeply moving. It is also full of unspeakable sorrow.'*

**Source:** [http://www.ppu.org.uk/genocide/g\\_armenia4.html](http://www.ppu.org.uk/genocide/g_armenia4.html)