

REMEMBERING RWANDA: AN EYEWITNESS TO THE HORROR

IN APRIL 1994, AN ESTIMATED THREE-QUARTERS OF A MILLION MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN WERE BRUTALLY SLAUGHTERED IN THE TINY CENTRAL AFRICAN COUNTRY OF RWANDA. IT WAS ONE OF THE WORST CASES OF GENOCIDE IN THE 20TH CENTURY.

BY ALEX BELIDA

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted in 1948, soon after the end of World War II. Its preamble was clearly influenced by the atrocities of that conflict, asserting that “disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind.”

Yet 10 years ago, in April 1994, despite the promises of “never again” uttered in the wake of the Holocaust, the international community failed to respond when ethnic massacres exploded across Rwanda. An estimated 750,000 men, women and children were brutally slaughtered in the tiny Central African country of Rwanda. It was one of the worst cases of genocide in the 20th century.

Despite warnings of imminent disaster from United Nations officials, diplomats and others in Rwanda, the United States and other leading countries refused to intervene. When the killing began, most foreigners were evacuated, leaving behind a small, helpless contingent of U.N. peacekeepers who could do little more than protect themselves. Even as the grim death toll brought on by machete-wielding ethnic Hutu fanatics

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Among a handful of reporters who attempted to chronicle the bloodshed, often at great personal risk, Belida, then VOA's East Africa Bureau chief, traveled to Rwanda as the killing went on. He drew on some of his original broadcast scripts to prepare this article. The views are his own.

mounted, no action was taken. For a while the U.S. State Department refused even to acknowledge that what was happening in Rwanda was, in fact, genocide.

Only after nearly three-quarters of a million ethnic Tutsi and reconciliation-minded Hutu were butchered was there any sort of concerted international relief effort — and that, bizarrely, went mainly to assist the killers and their supporters after they were forced to flee into neighboring countries by Tutsi-led Rwandan rebels who eventually halted the bloodshed.

Discovering A Massacre

There were many major massacre sites scattered across the country. But none was perhaps more emotionally overpowering than the one in the small, remote eastern Rwandan town of Nyarubuye, where in late May 1994 I was among the first journalists to discover hundreds of corpses in and around a church. The following is a verbatim record of the words I dictated live to tape as I approached, and then walked through the site.

We've just driven several kilometers along a dirt road north from the Rwandan border town of Rusumo and we've arrived in a small town called Nyarubuye. And right here on the ground in front of me is the decomposed corpse of a child, its skull bleached white, its dress still lying on what is left of the body. In the tall grass nearby, another body. ... This body has been flattened, its skull crushed.

These bodies are lying in front of a church. Just in the courtyard here in front of the church I can count 10 bodies, assorted body parts. ... There's a decapitated child.

We're now about to go into the church itself and right on the steps is a body. And inside the church are several more bodies, again badly decomposed. ... Obviously people fled



A Timeline to Tragedy: Rwanda, 1300–1994

1300s: Tutsis migrate into what is now Rwanda, which was already inhabited by the Twa and Hutu peoples.

1600s: Tutsi King Ruganzu Ndori subdues central Rwanda and outlying Hutu areas.

1800s: Tutsi King Kigeri Rwabugiri establishes a unified state with a centralized military structure.

1890: Rwanda becomes a German colony following the partition of Africa at the Berlin Conference of 1885.

1919: After World War I, control of Rwanda is transferred from Germany to Belgium. Like Germany, Belgium perpetuates a hegemony of the minority Tutsi over the Hutu.

1933: Belgian administrators begin identifying Rwandans as either Tutsi or Hutu on birth certificates and identity cards.

1959-1961: A Hutu revolution overthrows the Tutsi monarchy. Gregoire Kayibanda, a Hutu, is elected president in 1961. Thousands of Tutsis are exiled to neighboring countries amidst several waves of massacres of Tutsi.

1962: Rwanda is granted independence.

1973: Maj. Gen. Juvenal Habyarimana, a Hutu, takes power in a coup d'état.

1990: The Rwandan Patriotic Front invades Rwanda from bases in Uganda. The RPF is made up largely of Tutsis who were refugees in Uganda and served in the Ugandan Army. Maj. Gen. Paul Kagame is head of the RPF.

1992: A cease-fire is declared between the RPF and the Habyarimana government.

1993: In October, the U.N. votes to send 2,500 troops to monitor the

peace and power-sharing accord between the RPF and the Habyarimana government.

1994: On Jan. 11, Maj. Gen. Romeo Dallaire, the U.N. commander in Rwanda, sends a coded cable saying he intends to take action on information that a Hutu plan to exterminate Tutsi is under way. The U.N. orders Dallaire to take no action.

On April 6, a plane carrying President Habyarimana and fellow Hutu President Cyprien Ntaryamira of Burundi is shot down on approach to the Kigali Airport. The two were returning from a meeting in Tanzania to discuss implementation of the peace and power-sharing accord. The attack is widely believed to have been the work of extremist Hutu, opposed to any power-sharing with the RPF. Within hours, government soldiers and Hutu militia begin killing Tutsis and moderate Hutus.

On April 10, the U.S. embassy in Kigali is closed. France, Belgium and the U.S. evacuate their citizens.

On April 14, Belgium withdraws troops from the U.N. Mission in Rwanda.

On April 21, the U.N. Security Council reduces the size of the U.N. military contingent in Rwanda from 2,500 to 270.

On April 29, U.N. Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali calls for more U.N. troops to be sent to Rwanda, stating that the number of killed may have reached 200,000. The Security Council rejects the request.

On April 30, the U.N. Security Council passes a resolution condemning the killing in Rwanda, but does not identify the killing as genocide (which would obligate the U.N. to take action against the perpetrators).

On May 10, the U.N. begins to discuss sending 5,500 troops to Rwanda; the Clinton administration

favors a smaller force.

On May 31, U.N. Secretary General Boutros-Ghali reports to the Security Council: "We have failed in our response to the agony of Rwanda, and thus have acquiesced in the continued loss of human lives." He states that "there can be little doubt" that the killing in Rwanda "constitutes genocide." The Clinton administration remains reluctant to use the word "genocide."

On June 8, the U.N. Security Council approves sending 5,500 troops to Rwanda.

On June 23, France, long a military supporter of the Hutu government, begins a "humanitarian intervention" in Rwanda that is opposed by NGOs but narrowly endorsed by the U.N. Security Council.

On July 4, the RPF captures Kigali, the capital of Rwanda.

On July 14, Rwandan refugees, mostly Hutus, begin flooding into Zaire, nearly a million over the next few days.

On July 18, the RPF says the war is over, declares a cease-fire and announces formation of a government.

On July 19, cholera strikes refugee camps in Zaire, killing thousands daily.

On July 23, President Clinton orders the Pentagon to send relief supplies to aid Rwandan refugees.

On Aug. 21, the French withdraw from Rwanda.

On Nov. 8, the U.N. Security Council approves a resolution setting up an international court to try people charged with genocide in Rwanda. Rwanda votes against the resolution, declaring it will cooperate with the court, but intends to carry out its own trials.

here to take shelter and obviously they didn't find it.

In the gardens outside the church are spectacular flowers, amaryllis, marigold, daisies — a huge explosion of color. And ... more bodies. A mother and her child. The child appears to have been decapitated.

The entire [church] complex appears to have been ransacked, looted. Papers with the church's symbol on it are scattered about, drawers emptied, cloth material just ripped apart. And again, more corpses. And flies. And here what seem to be shotgun shells ... which raises, of course, the question of whether some of these victims were blasted.

In this small room, there are some wooden crucifixes on the floor and what is left of the body of a small baby.

Our guides have told us that in the direction we're heading now, outside the church complex, there is a place where there are many bodies. And they're right. In front of me I can see a dozen corpses. They appear to be mainly women, some children.

The stench is really overwhelming and I've put a mask on so that may muffle my voice. But in this courtyard there are easily a hundred bodies, all of them very badly decomposed, many with obvious hack marks (from machetes).

Feeling Yourself Hacked

And here is a room of horror, dozens upon dozens of bodies, piled one on another. I think it's fair to say there are hundreds of dead here ... and everywhere, flies.

This village, we are told by a woman who lived here, was a predominantly Tutsi village and [she says] that this massacre was carried out by predominantly Hutu Interahamwe, the dreaded militia whose name is so associated with the unspeakable atrocities of this war. ...

It was at Nyarubuye that I met an elderly Hutu man who, with his wife,

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watched the killings. He told me he personally saw friends and neighbors slaughtered with machetes. Speaking through an interpreter, the man, Krisustum Gatunzi said it was unbelievable.

It's unbelievable to see your neighbors, friends being hacked to death. ... These people [the killers] say they want to create a new Rwanda ... and I was asking them, "Do you create a new Rwanda by killing everyone inside that Rwanda or by killing neighbors and friends?"

The interpreter went on to say Mr. Gatunzi had a special expression for what he felt — feeling yourself hacked.

The old man and his wife were credited with saving a young Tutsi woman, a 27-year-old neighbor named Consolata Mukatwagirimana, whom they helped hide. She believed her entire family had been slaughtered. She heard their screams.

I had taken cover in the nearby bush. All I know is I was hearing my family being massacred. Shooting and cries, screams. I managed to come out in the evening and checked and found everyone who was at home was killed. ...

They Don't Look Like Killers ...

Several days after visiting Nyarubuye, I was allowed by the pre-

dominantly-Tutsi rebels of the Rwandese Patriotic Front to interview a group of captured Hutu Interahamwe militia blamed for mass killings. I filed this report:

At first glance, nothing seems particularly sinister about this group of 21 Rwandans. ... They don't look like killers.

Yet in a series of interviews, members of this group of prisoners admit openly that they did join the Interahamwe, and that they did kill Tutsis and other political opponents at the group's behest. They now insist they only did so under duress and they say they didn't kill very many people, usually just one.

At 74 years of age, Joseph Rukwavu is the oldest member of the group. He claims government soldiers killed members of his family and then made him kill one of his brothers. He says he committed the murder with a club.

Like the elderly Mr. Rukwavu, 27-year-old Turatsinze [no first name] says he only joined the Interahamwe after the mass slaughter began in April. He also says he was forced to kill. His particular band of killers used machetes to hack apart more than 10 people, three of whom he admits he knew. He maintains that because he was forced to kill, he should be forgiven.

Julienne Mukanyarwa, 37 years old, is one of two women among the prisoners held at the jail. Her story is much the same. She says she joined the Interahamwe after other members of the group threatened to kill her baby.

She says the Interahamwe forced her and several others to finish off with machetes the survivors of a mass shooting organized by the militia and army soldiers. She insists she only killed one person, but says the massacre spanned three days.

And what about her baby? She says it is dead, fatally injured as it

was strapped to her back, killed by repeated blows aimed at her to urge her on in the killing fields. ...

The brutality that occurred in Rwanda 10 years ago need not have happened — or at least it could have been mitigated had the international community cared enough to act.

It Was No Secret

Ismael Amrisued was an aide and adviser to Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana, whose death in April 1994 in a suspicious plane crash marked the start of the genocide. I interviewed him in Rwanda where he was under protective custody of the rebels of the Rwandese Patriotic Front. He was a Hutu but was marked for death by the Interahamwe because he was a political moderate who favored reconciliation and power-sharing with the Tutsi-dominated RPF.

He told me it was no secret that young people from the ethnic Hutu side were being recruited and trained at special killing camps.

It was public. They used to recruit young people, put them in buses, take them to [various places in the countryside] and those guys were staying there one month or more and they were coming back quite proud, telling their stories of how they were going to get us one day, how they are going to kill us. ...

Mr. Amrisued told me the killings that began the night the president's plane was apparently shot down could hardly have been spontaneous. Just hours after the crash, hundreds had been killed, even in Rwandan towns far from the capital, Kigali. He says people in Rwanda tend to go to bed early and since the crash occurred late at night, few could have heard the news on the radio.

But at 2 in the morning, they had already started killing. Which means instructions or some phone exchange had been circulating in the country,

Everyone in the world community knew what was going on.

and then they started killing those who were already targeted or listed to be killed, and of course Tutsis were there to be killed.

He dismissed the notion that most of the killers had to be forced to participate in the bloodletting.

They were believing in what they were doing. I can't say all of them, but most of them were doing it willingly because they had been taught to do so. ... Once you believe that killing is good, killing a Tutsi is good, then you go and kill them. They have learned very well their lesson. ...

A Betrayal of Humanity

Senior U.N. officials confirmed to me that summer 10 years ago that they could have minimized the scope of the slaughter if authorities at the world body's headquarters in New York had approved action by the peacekeepers who were in Rwanda. The head of the peacekeepers, Canadian Major General Romeo Dallaire, had detailed information on the location of the weapons eventually used in the killings. He also had information on where the Hutu extremist militia were being trained in the art of killing and how their weapons were being distributed. He even knew which Rwandan political figures had been targeted for death.

Rwanda's current president, Paul Kagame, was head of the rebel RPF at the time of the genocide. He told me in an interview in the summer of

1994 that everyone in the world community knew what was going on.

The international community as a whole knew. Every ambassador here, from whichever European or American country, knew. So there is nobody who denies having prior knowledge. Everybody up to the Secretary General of the U.N., yes, that one I'm 100 percent sure of.

Understandably bitter, other leaders of the RPF were equally harsh in their condemnation of the foreign community, especially of France, Belgium and the United States. Theogene Rudasingwa was the secretary general of the RPF in 1994. He referred to an unholy alliance of foreign interests who not only ignored the warning signs leading up to the killing, but who later conspired to prevent the new Rwandese government from obtaining desperately-needed assistance.

We're talking about a very unholy cocktail of several people whom we may not mention [by name]. They may not be whole governments. They may be portions of governments. But at the end of the day, we are talking about a deliberate attempt on the part of some people in the international community to either do very little about what is happening or to conceal the evil that has been committed ... or to be accomplices.

It was not the international community's finest hour. It was a betrayal of the very essence of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in which nations effectively promised to fight tyranny and oppression in defense of individual dignity. Most troubling to me, what happened in Rwanda suggests that the very first article of the declaration, while well-intentioned, is in reality still a distant dream: "All human beings ... are endowed with reason and conscience and should act toward one another in a spirit of brotherhood." ■