

After the Genocide

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 West¹, 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.

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.'

¹ the countries of (originally) Europe and (now including) North America and South America

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 Interahamwe² 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 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.

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² The Interahamwe (Kinyarwanda meaning "those who stand/work/fight/attack together") is a Hutu paramilitary organization. The militia enjoyed the backing of the Hutu-led government leading up to, during, and after the Rwandan Genocide.