

Heart of Rwanda's Darkness: Slaughter at a Rural Church

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June 3, 1994



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The banner across the entrance to the red brick church here announces the celebration of a festival. A poster of Pope John Paul II is tacked on the main door and above it is a large white statue of Jesus, his arms beckoning. Inside are the remains of victims of a mass slaughter carried out by Government-trained militiamen in mid-April.

In what they had hoped would be a refuge from the deadly irrationality of tribal and political violence, more than 500 members of the Tutsi tribe found their way to the church compound only to be shot or hacked to death by Hutu soldiers in classrooms, bathrooms and courtyards, and then left to rot.

It appears that they were methodically hunted down, first in the church, then in the school and finally in the workshops near the soccer field. Residents say that probably 1,000 more were killed and buried in mass graves in the town, which is just inside the border with Tanzania.

A frenzy of killing was evident at the rear of the compound. There eight rooms are filled with hundreds of corpses, shoulder to shoulder, and piled onto one another. One hundred more killed in a courtyard are now half skeletons, their flesh in shreds. There are so many that it is impossible to walk through without treading on them. More corpses are hidden in the tall grass.

"It took them two days to kill everyone in the church," said Consolata Mukatwagirimana, 27, a Tutsi whose family was killed at home and who like the rest of the townspeople has fled to a camp 50 miles away. She accompanied reporters to the church.

"People from three communities had taken refuge in this place," she said. "Several hundred militias came. I recognized some from our own town. They were shooting and using machetes."

This village, now under control of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, the rebel group led by the minority Tutsi tribe, appears typical of many devastated by regular Army troops or militiamen of the majority Hutu tribe in the early days of the two-month old civil war. The buildings are empty, the livestock is gone. Only corpses and the sound of the wind remain.

When entire towns were erased by such massacres, the killers usually buried their victims. But many of Nyarubuye's dead remain where they fell, probably because the militia, and later the rebels, lacked the time or manpower to dispose of the bodies.

The massacre here took place on April 16 and 17. And while it is one of the largest known so far, it is one of more than a dozen uncovered in Rwanda since civil war broke out on April 6.

Since then, tens of thousands have been killed, with unverifiable estimates of 200,000 and more. Though the fighting is between the army and the rebels, the mass killings have mostly been done by Hutu military and the extremist militias, youths trained by the military and the former ruling party of Rwanda.

They have tried to mount a campaign to exterminate all members of the Tutsi minority tribe and have even hunted down moderate Hutu politicians. The massacres have been uncovered as more than half the country has been taken over by the rebels, who escorted journalists to see the butchery. United Nations officials and relief workers say there are more massacres to be discovered and that mass killings continue in Government-controlled areas.

Although the rebels have the upper hand militarily and are routing the Rwanda Army in the south, the fighting in the capital, Kigali, is heavy, with mortars and machine-gun fire at night. The Patriotic Front controls northern and eastern Rwanda, areas made mostly empty and silent by large-scale death. The rebels took over countryside already devastated by the Rwandan Army.

Near the northern rebel headquarters of Mulindi, on the Ugandan border, the large tea estates are overgrown and the fields unkempt.

Village after village is deserted but refugee camps marked by United Nations blue plastic tarpaulins have sprouted on the hills and in the towns. Rebels Protect Farmers

The paved road to Kigali is officially in rebel hands but few venture down it because they say it is unsafe. Most travelers prefer a dirt road with its detour of several hours. There are frequent rebel road checkpoints made of plastic Coca-Cola crates, but only occasionally are troops seen driving by. Rebels act as guards for farmers in the fields to protect them against marauding militias.

The area around Nyarubuye fell to the Patriotic Front in the first week of May but the town, about 20 miles east of Rusumu, Tanzania, on a dirt road, is so remote that the massacres were only discovered recently.

Almost all the residents have either taken refuge in Rusumo or have been killed. The town was mostly Tutsi, set high on a plateau covered with wild flowers. Soon after the massacres began in Kigali on April 6, Tutsis from three communities came to take refuge in the church. Bones on the Altar

Ms. Mukatwagirimana, who was given refuge by a Hutu family, said the militias had been planning the attack for a while. "It was not something they acted upon spontaneously," she said. "They had been thinking about it. Before they would talk about such things, but we thought it was just words. I have seen so much this does not shock me. I no longer feel and fear."

A dozen bodies lay sprawled in the brick church's main courtyard, some no more than pieces of flesh and skeletons dressed in clothes. One woman was hacked to death as she ran away. She lies face down, one arm outstretched, the other clutching her small child, decapitated. In the church, pieces of human flesh lie in between the low wooden pews. Bones and a skull clutter the altar.

The classrooms still have the chalked lessons on the blackboards. In one, the lesson of the day had been French conjugation. More than a dozen boys were killed there. Scores of spent cartridges litter the veranda.

In the sacristy of the church, which had been ransacked by the killers, incense censers had been thrown on the floor along with the priests' vestments and broken clay statuettes. Outside in the empty stillness, doors creak and the wind rustles like rain through the banana trees.

Almost all the residents have left. But too old to move, Chrisostome Gatunzi, a Hutu who says he is between 80 and 90 years old, stayed behind with his thin, frail wife. They live in a small house several hundred yards off the main road, tended by a nine-year-old grandson who just returned after three weeks hiding in the countryside.

Mr. Gatunzi says he heard the screams and watched his neighbors being killed but was too weak to do anything. He talks about how he watched the militias, in groups of 20, round up residents, kill them and then throw their bodies in mass graves a few hundred yards from his house. He cannot hold back his anger and pain. He chokes when he speaks.

"I witnessed when they hacked them and put them into a pit," Mr. Gatunzi said. "I knew some of them. I don't know why others want to kill Tutsis. We have lived together for such a long time as neighbors and friends. It's unbelievable seeing your neighbor hacked to death. These people are saying they want to create a new Rwanda. How can you do that by killing neighbors and friends? It has hurt my heart so much."