

Rwandians in Death Squad Say Choice Was Kill or Die

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Inside the Roman Catholic church here, a stone edifice with a rectangular bell tower high on a promontory jutting into Lake Kivu, several thousand Tutsi men, women and children sought sanctuary in April when killing started in their villages.

But a mob of several hundred Hutu men, some in uniforms with rifles but most in civilian clothes with clubs and machetes, had no respect for the church or for life.

Witnesses said the killing began about 10 in the morning; by early afternoon, blood and bodies filled the concrete floor of the church, the small side chapels, even the confession booths. Then the killers went off to drink beer.

The next day the mob moved on to the soccer stadium, less than a mile away in this small, grubby town with only one dirt road running through it. More than 7,000 Tutsi were gathered there. The soldiers fired rifle grenades into the crowd, then the militia swarmed over it, shouting "Power!" in English and hacking and beating people to death.

The slaughter started late in the afternoon, and some people were still alive at nightfall, which comes early along the equator. So the next morning, the mob returned to finish the job.

The violence in Kibuye was neither random nor spontaneous, and the United Nations has opened a sweeping investigation into massacres like these in the hope of trying the main culprits for what it calls acts of genocide in Rwanda.

Trials by international tribunals could yield some detailed answers on how the killings were orchestrated. But for now the outside world is struggling for an answer to the more troubling question of why so many Rwandan villagers took part -- or stood by passively -- when friends, neighbors and children were butchered.

In Kibuye, some people are still pondering the same question, and struggling to explain to themselves and to outsiders why they acted as they did.

Augustin Karara, the Mayor of this provincial capital, said the massacres here had been "the last step" in eliminating the Tutsi in the province of Kibuye.

The mob tried to force him to join the rampage, he said, but he refused. Perhaps by virtue of his position, the Mayor was not killed.

Other men joined against their will -- to save their own lives, they said, or the lives of Tutsi they were harboring at home.

Evode Micomyiza, a 33-year-old civics teacher, said he stood on the hill at the east end of the soccer stadium that day with a club in his hand as other men chopped and clubbed defenseless men, women and children.

Mr. Micomyiza said that he did not kill anyone and that he had gone along only because a gang heading to the stadium had said that if he did not join them in their "work" it was proof that he was a supporter of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, the Tutsi-led rebel army.

"We were forced to move with the killers in order not to be killed," he said.

When the carnage was over, Mr. Micomyiza said, he saw the bodies of three Tutsi who only a few days earlier he had been harboring in his house.

"Everyone had to participate," said Bernard Ndutiye, a Lutheran minister here. "To prove that you weren't R.P.F., you had to walk around with a club. Being a pastor was not an excuse. They said you can have religion afterwards." **Gangs Roamed the Town**

Mr. Ndutiye said every morning for days before the massacres, mobs roamed the town beating on drums and blowing whistles, calling men out of their houses to join them.

One day, a gang came to Mr. Ndutiye's house and found three Tutsi children he was protecting. The children were his children's playmates. The gang clubbed one of the Tutsi boys to death in front of his eyes. After that, Mr. Ndutiye said he agreed to take up a machete, but he said he never killed anyone and eventually found that if he feigned sickness the gangs would leave him alone. 'God Has Abandoned Us'

What came over this nation last April and May, when hundreds of thousands of Tutsi were slaughtered? Why did educated men like Mr. Ndutiye and Mr. Micomyiza not resist the mob, or run away rather than join it? What possessed Hutu men to kill their Tutsi wives, as many did?

How could Hutu men who were protecting Tutsi children go to other villages and kill Tutsi, as recounted by Mr. Ndutiye and Mr. Micomyiza?

"The same questions you're asking I'm asking myself," said Mr. Ndutiye, the minister in Kibuye, who is also the head of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany in Rwanda. "I haven't found the answers. There are times when you lose faith. Sometimes we think God has abandoned Rwanda and allowed the devil to enter the souls of our people."

At the moment a few things seem clear. It was not random violence that engulfed this country. "Five hundred thousand people aren't killed by a bunch of guys with machetes," says Lieut. Col. Erik de Stabenrath, a French military officer who has informally investigated the massacres in this area.

Land is often cited as the root cause of the killings -- that Hutu and Tutsi killed each other to keep the land they had or to take over the land of others. While this is one of the world's most densely populated countries, and rural peasants make up the bulk of the population, that explanation is not complete. Long-Simmering Resentment

Others point to long-simmering resentment between the Hutu majority and the Tutsi minority. But ethnic differences between the two are slight -- they speak the same language and have intermarried for so many generations that many Rwandans do not know if another person is a Hutu or a Tutsi.

Another explanation is that the violence arose out of a struggle for political power. "It is a problem of Hutu and Tutsi and power sharing," said Mr. Nduziye.

During centuries of feudalism the Tutsi ruled, even though they made up only about 15 percent of the population. The Belgians, who came in the early part of this century, perpetuated Tutsi dominance. In 1959 the Hutu started to rise and by the time of independence in 1962 they were on top. They killed thousands of Tutsi and forcing tens of thousands into exile.

In 1990 a group of exiled Tutsi in Uganda launched a civil war under the banner of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, and the Hutu began to worry about losing power. At the same time, under pressure from Western governments, Rwanda, which had been a one-party state since independence, allowed other parties to form. 'Those Who Attack Together'

The parties created organizations for young people. The ruling Hutu party, the National Republican Movement for Democracy and Development, called its youth wing the Interahamwe (pronounced inter-a-hahm-way), which means "those who attack together." Interahamwe has since entered the Rwandan lexicon as a word used loosely and interchangeably with "militia."

The Rwandan Army provided the Interahamwe with the arms and training that turned it into a military organization. As the rebel Patriotic Front advanced, the militia focused on Tutsi as targets. Soon every Tutsi was seen as a rebel supporter, as were moderate Hutu who opposed the Government.

With support from elements of the army, the militia launched what was tantamount to the final solution in April after President Juvenal Habyarimana, a Hutu, died in a mysterious plane crash. Within hours the killings started, first in Kigali, where moderate Hutu and

intellectuals were slain along with Tutsi.

Quickly the violence spread throughout Rwanda's hills and valleys. "The authorities here received orders from Kigali to eliminate the Tutsi," said Celestin Semanza, who was Deputy Mayor of the district of Mabanza, which is within the province of Kibuye. He said that soldiers arrived by jeep from Kigali and that the Interahamwe came in buses from other provinces. "We couldn't stop them," he said. An Arbitrary Ethnic System

That was when the Tutsi from Mabanza and other villages fled to the church and stadium in Kibuye.

The militia began killing in Kibuye around April 13, one week after the President's plane went down.

"I saw people running through the streets with machetes and clubs. They killed all the Tutsi in their way," said Mr. Micomyiza, the teacher.

Like many Rwandans, Mr. Micomyiza escaped death only because of Rwanda's arbitrary ethnic system, which says that a child takes his race from his father. Mr. Micomyiza's mother is a Tutsi, but his father is a Hutu. "People who are dead are the same as me, but their father is Tutsi," he said.

Hutu and Tutsi lived peaceably in the region before the violence broke out. When the killing started, Mr. Micomyiza, like many Hutu, protected Tutsi. In his house, he hid a man he had known from childhood and two young women who were his neighbors.

The militia went from house to house searching for Tutsi, and one day a band of 40 men appeared at his adobe dwelling. Mr. Micomyiza gave them money and they went away, but they warned they would come back. Mr. Micomyiza then told the three Tutsi in his house that they should go to the stadium for protection.

The militiamen who came to Kibuye were from other parts of the country, Mr. Micomyiza and other residents said, a pattern that has been reported throughout the country. But once in the town or village, the militia recruited local men. The easiest people to recruit were peasants, the uneducated, unemployed and young toughs. Recruiting the Ignorant

"They used people who had not been to school, who could not analyze," said Mr. Micomyiza.

The message was a simple one -- all Tutsi were supporters of the Patriotic Front and if the Front won the war, all Hutu would be killed.

But Mr. Micomyiza too got dragged into the butchery, a man with a university degree, a man who founded a secondary school for both Hutu and Tutsi last year. "It was just a way of protecting myself," he said. "We risked being killed. They said, 'If you don't come and work

with us, you are R.P.F.' "

He said he never killed anyone, that he always "melted away" when the killing started, as he did at the stadium.

This is what most men who were part of the mobs did, he explained. "You are trying to understand how so many could be convinced to kill," he said. "But not that many were convinced.

"We just went along. We were not free. We followed in order not to be killed ourselves." He distinguished between "passive" and "active" participation.

But why had he even passively taken part? He was, after all, a man who could "analyze," who could reason, who could even get in a car and leave?

"I come back to the question of freedom and liberty," Mr. Micomyiza said. "If I had been free I wouldn't have picked up that club."