

Genocide in Rwanda

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During the first week of April 1995 I visited Rwanda as the guest of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). My brief was to speak at a conference and to meet some of the people who are providing counselling and support to the huge numbers of people who were bereaved and otherwise traumatised in the genocide which took place during April and May 1994.

Rwanda is only slightly larger than Wales. It has a population density not much different from England but without the industrial base to support it. A hilly country with a wonderful climate which allows two harvests a year, it should be an Eden but for the terrible heritage of violence that has been eating at its heart for 35 years.

I spent the first two days talking to aid workers several of whom were Rwandans who had lost members of their families. These included a social worker who had been attending a conference in Nairobi when the massacres broke out and returned to find that her husband, parents and five children had all been killed, and a young psychologist who had recently moved with most of his family to Belgium. He had left his son in Rwanda to complete his schooling. The boy was lost along with many of his classmates. Their stories are typical of a country in which up to a million men, women and children have been slaughtered in a systematic attempt at genocide which appears to have been organised by a corrupt government in an attempt to destroy their political opponents and remain in power.

Readers will be familiar with the story. In the context of an uneasy truce in the civil war, which has been going on in Rwanda since 1990, the United Nations along with all of the countries surrounding Rwanda finally persuaded the President of Rwanda to agree to hold democratic elections, the outcome of which would have led to the downfall of the Government in power. Three days later, the plane in which the President was travelling, along with the President of neighbouring Burundi, was shot down by missiles whose origin has never been established. The ruling family, who were Hutus, blamed members of the Tutsi tribe and within 24 hours had initiated the systematic killing of their Hutu political opponents as well as of all men, women and children who were thought to be Tutsis. Within the next 14 days the killing spread throughout Rwanda and massacres took place in most towns and villages. A million people are said to have been slaughtered by means of frag-

mentation grenades which were thrown into the churches, schools and other places where the terrified victims had taken refuge. The doors were then thrown open and anyone left alive finished off with clubs and machetes.

There then followed a mopping-up operation in which local militia regularly searched the homes, work places and hospitals to find and kill any of the 'cockroaches' who had survived the massacres. Parents hid their children in holes in the ground or left them unaccompanied in the bush (for a child accompanied by a Tutsi parent would be killed). As a consequence there were, when I visited, still 40,000 children in Rwanda and 45,000 in surrounding countries who had literally 'lost' their parents. Most of them had witnessed horrific events.

During the first month the rate of killing exceeded that achieved by Hitler in his gas chambers, but this genocide was not carried out by professional guards but by local militia and neighbours of the Tutsi minority. The arrival of a victorious Tutsi army brought an end to the genocide but triggered a mass exodus of two million people who are now living in refugee camps in the surrounding countries. Some took refuge in a 'Safe Zone' set up by the French and subsequently handed over to the current Government. Their army's attempts to force the refugees to return to their home villages triggered another massacre.

I visited Rwanda on the eve of the first anniversary of the genocide. Five thousand bodies which had been dug up from mass graves were to be reburied in a cemetery overlooking the capital city of Kigali. Dignitaries from Africa and other countries were in attendance and the world press were present in large numbers. The Hotel Mille Collines was a crowded fortress with guards in every corridor but the streets were sparsely populated and the shops closed because of the national holiday. Only a few street children and amputees begged for money or tried to sell cigarettes. A curfew came into force at 5 pm but this did not deter anyone with a vehicle bearing the UN emblem from driving and I was able to spend evenings with hospitable members of UNICEF staff.

Our conference took place on the day preceding the burial service and enabled us to draw attention to the need for counselling and support of the numerous people who had been psychologically traumatised by the war and the massacres. Leila Gupta, who is in charge of UNICEF's 'Trauma Recovery Program', is setting up a network of people across Rwanda who will have been trained in bereavement and trauma counselling. She has a mammoth task and the financial resources of UNICEF are already over-stretched, but if youth and enthusiasm count for anything then

this team deserves to succeed.

The burial ceremony was extraordinary. A small group of us from UNICEF, along with other officials, drove in our UN vehicle onto the pitch of a football stadium in which the seats were occupied with huge coffins each of which contained 20 or so bodies. In this strange setting it was as if the dead had come back to watch the petty antics of the living. We milled about and talked in hushed tones while gangs of sweating men loaded the coffins onto giant trucks for the two-hour drive to the burial ground. The procession drove slowly through the streets which were lined with all the population of Kigali, past the ruined churches and the shell-torn signs of war, through the hovels of the shanty towns and through the fields of cassava and coffee bushes which line the thousand hills of this fertile and overpopulated land.

Nobody who visits Rwanda can fail to be captivated by it. This made it all the harder to witness the blank expressions on the faces of the tens of thousands who lined the streets to watch the procession. Nobody cried or smiled or waved. Even small children stood in silent family groups along with their older brothers and sisters, their thoughts locked up within their heads.

Arriving at the lovely hillside burial site we were ushered to seats beneath a covered canopy which was sprayed with scented water to offset the acrid aroma of the dead. Ten thousand others stood or sat in the bright sunshine, silent onlookers who shed no tears and talked quietly between themselves. An endless line of trucks unloaded their grisly contents onto barks of timber which had been placed in readiness across long trenches. A small choir sang cheerful songs about Jesus and the bright sunshine seemed indecently obtrusive. The archbishop spoke briefly as the body of the late President together with the coffin of an unknown victim of the genocide were lowered side by side into the ground. There followed a long succession of speeches in various tongues. We did not stay until the end, one of our party was feeling sick and the rest of us were glad of the excuse to slip away.

I lingered on in Kigali for three more days, typing reports, broadcasting on the radio (probably my most important contribution) and swimming in the hotel pool along with press men, aid workers and the UN Human Rights officers (who have the impossible task of monitoring abuses which, if reported to the authorities, often lead to more abuses of human rights, for the system of law and order has broken down).

On the journey home my plane broke down in Nairobi which gave me the opportunity to fulfil a life's ambition to visit a game park. The park was all it should have been and I pretended to be a tourist, but my heart was not in it.