

Two decades later, Rwanda rises from the ashes of genocide

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Rwandan children listen and pray during a Sunday morning service at the Sainte-Famille Catholic Church, the scene of many killings during the 1994 genocide, in the capital Kigali, Rwanda, on April 6, 2014. Photo: AP Photo/Ben Curtis

JOHANNESBURG, South Africa — It's been 20 years since Rwanda's mass killings wiped out nearly one million people. Now, in scattered villages on steep green hillsides, many who killed their neighbors live side by side with relatives of the dead.

Hutus and Tutsis are the largest ethnic groups in the country. In 1994, Hutus killed more than 800,000 Tutsis — and even some Hutus — in one of the worst crimes of the past 100 years.

Rwanda has made stunning progress since then.

Speech that creates ethnic divisions has been outlawed. Local tribunals called gacaca courts have allowed many killers to be released from prison. In return, they issue confessions and expressions of remorse. And a generation of young people who grew up after the mass killings symbolize the hope of a new breed of Rwandans who identify not by ethnicity but by nationhood.

An Impressive Recovery

Life expectancy has doubled since 1994 to more than 60 years. The number of deaths of children under 5 has dropped in the past two decades from 230 per 1,000 to 55 out of every 1,000. Economic growth has consistently expanded each year.

In the years since the bloodletting, the small Central African country has impressed donors giving aid and investors seeking to do business. Lately, however, human rights groups have criticized President Paul Kagame for his increasingly authoritarian approach.

Kagame says that improved education and an end to poverty are the most effective ways to prevent a return of violence. The government spends a quarter of its budget on health and 17 percent on education, according to the World Bank.

The positive news out of Rwanda stands in sharp contrast to the results of the West's record of preventing genocide since Rwanda's bloodletting. The international community vowed that "never again" would the world stand by as the massacres that occurred in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia in the mid-1990s unfolded.

In 2002, the International Criminal Court was set up to prosecute individuals for, among other charges, the targeted killing of an entire people, called genocide, and crimes against humanity. And in 2005, a summit of world leaders adopted the doctrine of the "responsibility to protect." This obliged the international community to move in when civilians are under attack and their governments fail to protect them.

Africa's Bloody Conflicts

But the United Nations still fails to protect civilian populations when wars break out.

In the Central African Republic, killings of Muslims by Christian militias have been taking place for months. A proposed U.N. force substantial enough to halt the slaughter has yet to be deployed, while in the meantime, most of the Muslim population has fled the country.

Elsewhere in Africa, international intervention has shown mixed success. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, U.N. troops have been criticized for not preventing attacks on civilians by armed groups. However, last November U.N. troops helped Congolese army forces defeat M23, a rebel group. M23 is backed by Rwanda — another reason that Kagame faces criticism.

In South Sudan, U.N. troops failed to prevent an estimated 10,000 ethnic killings in December, though the death toll might have been even higher without the U.N. presence.

The Rwandan genocide was triggered April 7, 1994. A plane carrying Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana and Burundian President Cyprien Ntaryamira, both Hutus, was shot down near the Kigali airport. The source of the attack is disputed, with Kagame's government saying that Hutu extremists in Habyarimana's military assassinated him as an excuse to wipe out Tutsis.

Kagame's Rwandan Patriotic Front had invaded northern Rwanda in 1990 from Uganda in an attempt to oust the Habyarimana government. But after nearly three years of civil war, a peace deal was signed. The agreement called for a power-sharing deal that was to lead to elections.

The downing of the plane undermined the peace deal and triggered the mass killing of Tutsis and some Hutus by Hutu extremists. Some of the perpetrators were radio hosts, who used their programs to call Tutsis "cockroaches" that should be exterminated.

Neighbors killed neighbors and entire families were wiped out. Some were killed in Roman Catholic churches where they had fled for refuge.

"We Must Work Hard"

The U.N. Assistance Mission for Rwanda, sent to roll out the peace deal, did nothing to halt the bloody rampage, blaming their restrictive orders. Western powers did not try to step in. Bill Clinton, then the U.S. president, has since apologized, admitting last year that as many as 300,000 lives could have been saved had Americans acted.

After three months of fighting, Kagame's forces reached the capital, Kigali, and drove the Rwandan army and government-backed militias from power.

Today, Kagame frequently exhorts his countrymen to work hard, remember the genocide, but to move forward. He extols the virtue of Rwandan democracy and self-reliance.

Rwanda is ranked by the World Bank as one of the easiest places to do business in Africa. Though the most intensely populated country in Africa, the nation of 11 million is self-sufficient in farming, according to the World Food Program. Malnutrition among children has declined, though it remains a problem.

Monthly work details, in which all citizens are required to participate in Saturday cleanup days, have something of an authoritarian feel to them — but the country is as neat as a pin.

“We must work hard because if we wait for others to develop our country, we will not make progress,” Kagame said last month. “Any external help must only come as an addition to our own efforts to better ourselves.”

Quiz

- 1 The author shows that Kagame and Rwandans are trying to create peace and prosperity by all of the following EXCEPT:
 - (A) Kagame has spent money on education and health.
 - (B) Local courts have allowed many killers to be released from prison.
 - (C) Kagame had led a rebel group attempting to oust the Habyarimana government.
 - (D) One Saturday a month, all citizens are required to participate in cleaning up Rwanda.

- 2 Which paragraph in "We Must Work Hard" best shows the progress Rwanda has made in the past 20 years?

- 3 The author draws a connection between all of the following EXCEPT:
 - (A) ethnicity and wars in Africa
 - (B) Rwanda's progress and the U.N.
 - (C) U.N. failures and killings in African countries
 - (D) the Rwandan president's plane crash and the start of genocide

- 4 Which paragraph in the article shows the event that ended the genocide in Rwanda?