

Rwanda 1994 killings weren't 'genocide': US study

Reuters, April 3, 2004

US researchers are challenging the conventional view that the 1994 massacre of some 800,000 Rwandans was a "genocide", drawing an angry response from the government who accused them of insulting survivors.

An aide to Rwandan President Paul Kagame said the research was a "malicious" attempt to distort the truth just days ahead of memorials on Wednesday to mark the 10th anniversary of the start of the killings.

The research also questioned the commonly held view that the majority of victims were from Rwanda's ethnic Tutsi minority, rather than the Hutu majority, in another challenge to a government dominated by Tutsis.

"People simply have the basic facts wrong, and worse, many don't even appear interested in assembling the necessary information," Christian Davenport said, a political science professor from the University of Maryland who carried out the study.

"We consider this more of a totalitarian purge, a politicide, rather than ethnic cleansing or genocide," Professor Davenport said in a statement.

The conventional view says extremists from the Hutu majority organised a genocide in an attempt to exterminate Tutsis, who they perceived as challenging their long-standing domination of the government.

Bands of militia coupled with soldiers and paramilitaries hunted down and killed Tutsis and Hutu moderates in 100 days of slaughter that began on April 6, 1994, when a plane carrying the Rwandan president was shot down.

The genocide is widely considered to have ended when Tutsi rebels led by Mr Kagame ousted the government and seized control of the capital of Kigali in July 1994.

Professor Davenport agrees the killings began with an organised cadre of Hutu militiamen, but argues that they quickly cascaded into an ever-widening circle of violence, with both Hutus and Tutsis playing the role of victims and aggressors.

"Our research strongly suggests that a majority of the victims were Hutus – there weren't enough Tutsis in Rwanda at the time to account for all the reported deaths," Professor Davenport said, who worked with an associate, Allan Stam, from Dartmouth College.

“Either the scale of the killing was much less than is widely believed, or more likely, a huge number of Hutus were caught up in the violence as inadvertent victims.

“The evidence suggests the killers didn’t try to figure out who everybody was.

“They erred on the side of comprehensiveness,” Professor Davenport said.

Many researchers and the government maintain that most of the victims were Tutsis, while Mr Kagame, himself a Tutsi, has based much of his legitimacy on his role in leading the Rwandan Patriotic Front rebels who ended the genocide.

“It’s an insult to survivors and to Rwandans in general,” Alfred Ndahiro said, an adviser to Mr Kagame.

“I think we should treat it with contempt – it’s incredible that such things can come up at this time,” he told Reuters on Saturday.

He said the government had not yet seen the report, but insisted that any attempt to deny genocide took place would be to deny the truth.

Professor Davenport said he had used findings from approximately 10 independent investigations to create a database of the killings and had worked with the UN International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda based in Tanzania, the National University of Rwanda and Rwanda’s justice ministry.

– *Reuters*