

Captain Mbaye was a daring, humane officer – ex-colleague

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Brig Gen El Hadji Babacar Faye, a retired Senegalese General who served in Rwanda during the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi. Photo : Courtesy.

A retired Senegalese General who served in Rwanda during the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, recently told *The New Times* about the daring missions his contingent clandestinely launched to rescue nearly 600 Tutsi, against all odds.

Brig Gen El Hadji Babacar Faye, 61, a first as an African military observer and later as a UN peacekeeper, as part of the United Nations Assistance Mission to Rwanda (UNAMIR).

Faye also paid a glowing tribute to his long-time friend and former classmate, late Captain Mbaye Diagne, a compatriot who paid the ultimate price for his extraordinary humanitarian deeds while saving lives in Rwanda.

According to the General, the late “Capt Mbaye Diagne, was daring, courageous, humane, and so much more.”

Diagne was killed in action while he served with UNAMIR and during the 2010 liberation day celebrations in Kigali, he was posthumously awarded the Umurinzi – Rwanda’s campaign against the Genocide medal by President Paul Kagame, for his courage in saving lives during the Genocide.

When the Genocide began in 1994, he carried out daring missions in Kigali to rescue folks targeted for extermination by the genocidal forces. Diagne did this on his own initiative, with no force under his command, no resources and at a great risk of his life.

When his friend died, Faye was “devastated.”

“I knew him very well. He was my classmate, first. I went to cadet school in Moroc-

co. He went to cadet school in Senegal and we graduated the same year. We came across, together, in the Casamance war in the south of Senegal. And we stayed for three years together when I was in the supporting unit and he was in the forward unit. We got on really, as tight friends. Mbaye was very friendly. He was an easy person to interact with.”

When Diagne met you for the first time, Faye said, he would carry you. It was just his way of getting friendly with new acquaintances “because he is someone who was very generous.”

At work, Diagne was also regarded by his compatriot as “very professional” and, like the soldier he was, “very hard on the field.” There was more to his tough soldier personality, though.

Faye said : “Mbaye could take your fight because he is seeing that there is no justice upon you. If you are fighting with somebody and he sees that you are the weak person he can fight for you and fight much more than you can expect even without knowing you.”

It is, acceptably, his noble acts of selflessness when being concerned more with the needs of other people than with his own, that made him well liked.

“He was very open and welcoming. Mbaye organised some football game, when he was deployed in Nkumba, with some youths there. He called us to come from Kigali and play football with the youths there, just to give people a little hope because at the moment it was tense !

That day, we stayed in Nkumba till around 7p.m. People were very scared because they thought we would be killed on our way back

to Kigali. We said, no, we are going back. We went back safely. He was so daring.”

Faye also talked, at length, about the ‘very risky’ reconnaissance missions Diagne pulled off during the day and at night across Interahamwe checkpoints in Kigali.

“He was operating across the Interahamwe checkpoints. He interacted with everyone and people took him as a friend. They [Interahamwe] were not controlling him because he was very useful to them. He was sharing his meals, he was giving beer, he was giving tobacco, and more. But he was very courageous ; and ready to help. Wherever there was danger, the danger was not seen by Diagne. He was daring, courageous, humane, and so much more.”

Overwhelmed by requests from relatives to rescue trapped family members, Diagne would, most especially during the day, move around town checking out locations where some Tutsi were hiding. He would comfort them and, later at night or at any other opportune time, he would launch stealth operations to remove them from their hideouts and take them to secure locations. The Senegalese also used to beat airport security and sneak people into planes headed out of the country.

Diagne, the former aide-de-camp of General Roméo Dallaire, the Canadian army officer who led the ill-fated UN peacekeeping mission (1993–94) in Rwanda], was murdered by the genocidal forces during one of his rescue missions.

“I was devastated when he died. We shared a lot.”

“I was the one who shared the last four years of his life because we stayed three years

in Casamance, and one year in Rwanda. In Casamance we were sleeping in the same compartment,” Faye said. The duo fought in the Casamance conflict between the Government of Senegal and the separatist rebel group in the country’s southern region since the early 1980s.

Following a distinguished tour of service in the Casamance region, Diagne was deployed to Rwanda as part of the Senegalese military observer contingent with the Organization of African Unity and continued on as a military observer with UN mission in Rwanda.

Hollywood maybe not interested in genuine African heroes

Asked what he makes of the fact that no film has ever been made about the Senegalese contingent, or Capt Mbaye Diagne, yet a movie was made about Paul Rusesabagina, a fake hero, according to survivors of the Genocide who were in Hôtel des Mille Collines, where the latter was manager, Faye said : “First of all, what you should understand is that the movie is a business. And those who are making business are looking at what story can bring money.”

Can’t the story of the Senegalese peacekeepers’ heroism make money, I asked.

“Yes, sure,” he replied.

“But we should have somebody to take it into account and to sell it. Those [in Hollywood] were, maybe, not interested in genuine African heroes. That’s the point. The second

point is ; in today’s history, when something happens, in French it is said that ‘les trains qui arrivent à l’heure n’intéressent personne’ [trains that arrive on time are of no interest to anyone]. The interest of everybody is on the train which is late.”

The meaning of the French adage, Faye explained, is that sometimes, the right things, or the right story, do not interest many people.

“What is fabricated has more taste. And again, you know, when we were in Rwanda, we were not working to make history. When we were there (Rwanda) we were not working to make history. We were working upon our sense of solidarity with another African people. We were working upon a sense of professionalism and a sense of humanity. And so, we were dedicated to help and be useful to the people that put all their hope in our presence. This is what we were trying to fulfil. We were working to do our job.”

Faye said they were dedicated to help and to be useful to “these people that put all their hope in our presence.”

Serving humanity, and Rwandans in need, was the only duty, or role, they were trying to fulfil.

“It had never come in our mind that we could relate in fact to this story,” Faye said, explaining that none of his countrymen ever thought about their kindness being subject for a movie script.

But today, he supposed, it is not too late. He is giving the idea some good thought.

“Some people are asking me to write. I may come to write a book. It can even be a movie. All the time, I was always talking about Capt

Mbaye Diagne ; of what he did, until somebody told me they had the testimony of Letitia and me and what we [the Senegalese] did and wanted to know what I thought about a book. It is when I really started talking about what we did. And what the contingent did. Today, it is not all about Letitia. The 49 people, if they are all not departed, many can tell you what happened in our house, and when we took them to Amahoro [stadium].”

Letitia Murekatete, a former neighbour in Kicukiro, Kigali, is one of the 49 people Faye and his compatriots refused to abandon, and eventually saved, on April 7, 1994.

Fearing the marauding Interahamwe, all these people had streamed into a small bungalow Faye shared with three of his compatriots in Kicukiro, in the area near the Bralirwa Headquarters. At the time, when Faye and his colleagues called headquarters and reported that they had civilians whose lives were at stake, their pleas fell on deaf ears.

“We said we have civilians in our house. They [UN bosses] said : ‘today, we cannot save anyone. Our mission is to save you [UN personnel] only.’

So, the Senegalese, as usual, had to devise and carry out a covert plan to rescue these

people. And they had to move fast.

Later in the afternoon, around 3, Faye said, three other Senegalese arrived at the house with three pickup trucks. “They embarked everyone with us and we took them to Amahoro, all of them !”

In 2010, Faye accompanied Diagne’s family to Kigali, to receive the Umurinzi medal.

At some point during their brief stay he was hosted on national television.

“I went on television that night. When I started talking, people started calling. They wanted to meet me. I said, please, don’t give my address. I didn’t do it for any gain.”

However, today, he said, he feels more confident to “express my solidarity” with the people his contingent rescued.

“There are families I knew and I went to try see if I could save them but when I arrived I found their houses empty and I found blood everywhere. I knew that they had been killed on the spot.”

For his acts in 1994 in Rwanda, the UN Security Council in 2014 created a medal in honour of Diagne’s courageous acts in Rwanda; the “Captain Mbaye Diagne Medal for Exceptional Courage”

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