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To Hell and Back

A decade after the genocide, Roméo Dallaire writes about his uneasy return

ROMEO DALLAIRE

In 1994, Maj.-Gen. **Roméo Dallaire** and the tiny United Nations peacekeeping force he led in Rwanda were forced to stand helplessly by as a civil war in the central African nation descended into genocide. In a 100-day period, as the UN ignored Dallaire's pleas to intervene, Hutu extremists massacred some 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus before rebel Tutsi forces of the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) emerged victorious. The bloodbath has continued to haunt the retired Canadian military officer, who went public in 1997 with the fact that he was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. But in April, Dallaire returned to Rwanda with a film crew from White Pine Pictures to mark the 10th anniversary of the slaughter. The resulting documentary, *Shake Hands With the Devil: The Journey of Roméo Dallaire*, had its world premiere last week at the Toronto International Film Festival. Dallaire, who was also accompanied on the April trip by his wife Elizabeth and *Maclean's* Chief Photographer **Peter Bregg**, describes what it was like to return to Rwanda for the first time in a decade. He dedicates this piece "To the Rwandans, abandoned to their fate, who were slaughtered in the hundreds of thousands, and to the 14 UN soldiers under my command who died bravely in the service of peace and humanity."

ENORMOUS ANXIETY overwhelmed me for a few minutes as we banked for the final approach to Kigali airport. I turned to Elizabeth and asked her the rhetorical question, "Why did I come back here?" The superficial answers were evident: there was the documentary film crew and I had been officially invited; I was to present a paper on conflict at an international conference in Kigali, the capital of Rwanda; and I wanted Beth to see, feel, smell and hear Rwanda. But there had to be more. What would compel me to return to "hell" 10 years later?

The Kigali of today and of 10 years ago are two different worlds. Now this fast-growing metropolis in the heart of Africa has a booming economy with a striving population, new construction, modern infrastructure, cleanliness and a rigid imposition of order. Gone are the sights of every possible window destroyed, and artillery, rocket and machine gun damage on blackened buildings. Gone too are the blood and gore, the acrid and suffocating smell of death stagnant in every corner, bodies in rags stacked like cordwood, fresh mass graves filled to the brim, and raped and dismembered bodies of young women and girls in dark passageways.

The contrast was complete, right down to the now-optimistic Col. Frank Kamanzi, a liaison officer with the RPF in 1994. Frank, who greeted us upon landing, smiled and hugged me, although with a bit of reserve. The modern architectural jewel of Rwanda was and remains the air terminal. I had last seen it ransacked and shelled. But now, instead of the tattered, worn-out UN flag on the roof, it had Rwanda's new flag, which I did not recognize. (Frank later told me that Rwanda has a new national anthem as well.) Where hundreds of car wrecks, garbage and broken-down airport machinery once lay, the tarmac was impeccable and there was plenty of modern equipment. There was even a very serious and professional-looking security squad staring at me and my entourage as we marched off the plane.

The transformation of Kigali and most of the *Milles Collines* -- "the thousand hills" being an apt nickname for Rwanda -- was very positive. But shudders of unreality at times forced me to look away in disbelief. Everywhere, the destruction, the smell and the sights of hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced persons had been removed as if with scalpel-like precision. Continuously,

the current normality was overridden by mental video clips showing, with seemingly digital clarity, the horrors at the same place 10 years ago. These contrasting visions simply became too much for me, both emotionally and physically, and led to some very moody moments as I went through bouts of anger and happiness. And so, as I was lost in my inner state, the pilgrimage became harder with every passing day. I had hoped to seek forgiveness from the tens of thousands of Rwandan spirits that roam the hills and valleys, but the trip ultimately turned out to be a sort of guided tour in a paradise restored. I couldn't wait for it to end.

This aesthetic presentation of Rwanda left me with a sense that something was being camouflaged, assimilated, or even eradicated. The first sign was the overwhelming presence of members of the Tutsi tribe in both governmental and security forces. The minister of defence is one of the token Hutus in cabinet. The second sign was the imposition on all Rwandans to renounce their ethnic origins: anyone who refers to their Tutsi or Hutu origins risks imprisonment. This rather draconian means of reconciliation seems to violate human rights and remains, in my opinion, a very risky policy of reconstituting a cohesive Rwandan citizenry.

Much of the nine-day trip was dedicated to discussing the tragic events of 1994 and visiting some 15 or so sites where I had conducted most of my work. Local people would recognize me and come forward to shake my hand and thank me for having attempted to stop the genocide. This was the best therapy I could ever get. It meant that some of the survivors had neither rancor nor disdain for the little that my critically reduced force was able to do during the 100 days of genocide.

I was brought abruptly back down to earth, however, during our visit to the huge Amahoro soccer stadium in Kigali. As I was describing the horror and privation that more than 12,000 refugees suffered for months in the enclosure while being protected by my few troops, three Tutsi survivors approached me with a petition. They stated, in essence, that they are receiving next to no support to help them rebuild their homes and have little access to jobs and health care. As well, they said, the government considers them a nuisance when they complain. There are clear divisions within the Tutsi: those who fought the war from bases in refugee camps outside Rwanda and the wealthy Tutsi diaspora that has now returned from far and wide look with disdain upon the poor who stayed behind through the Hutu oppression. These poor seem to be ignored in the new regime's social development plan.

Taking a closer look at this "modern" Rwandan society, I saw a seven-tier citizens' grouping of sorts. Firmly in charge of the country are the RPF leaders and troops and the very well-to-do expatriates who, even in the last days of the war, came back in hordes and started displacing poor Tutsi survivors from their homes. Second are the Tutsi survivors looking for compensation for their losses and seeking entry into the mainstream of society. Third are the Hutus who have been displaced internally and are making do either with lower-paying jobs or a life of poverty on their small plots of land across the countryside. Fourth are those Hutus who had fled into the Congo and Tanzania for fear of the RPF onslaught during the civil war. There is an abundance of rehabilitation/reconciliation programs for this group, although security monitoring exists in specific areas of the country.

Fifth are the suspected perpetrators of the genocide, the returning Hutu soldiers of the former Rwandan Government Forces and their allies. Most are languishing in terrible conditions in Rwandan jails, slowly going through the village justice system of reintegration known as the Gacaca. Sixth are the extremists of the old regime, some living in Europe and safe places in Africa. Others live in the jungles of eastern Congo where they're supported by a variety of sources -- seemingly including the Congolese government -- and conduct murderous raids into Rwanda. Finally, the last group is made up of the most hard-line, Tutsi-hating leaders. The brains and

instigators of the genocide, many of them have been dealt with by the International Criminal Tribunal in Arusha.

This is the mosaic of Rwandan society that resulted from the genocide and the civil war. Can Gen. Paul Kagame, the current president, bring about his risky plan of ending tribal differentiation through assimilation of the two original ethnic groups? Can he respond in a timely and fair fashion to the different needs of the population? Can he do this while vigilantly monitoring his borders against continuous raids and a potential invasion by expatriate hard-liners, as well as possible insurrection by oppressed Hutus? A tall order, indeed, for any political leader.

The trip did not really meet my possibly unrealistic expectations. I did not sufficiently grieve or commune with the spirits of the dead Rwandans hidden below a few feet of red earth. Nor was I able to search out, to my satisfaction, those Rwandan leaders and simple folk I had befriended years ago and who I hoped had survived. I will do this in the future, as Beth has agreed to my proposal to return to live in Rwanda for a year or so.

Knowing now that a G7 meeting of the most powerful nations on Earth, including Canada, was being held in Naples during the genocide in 1994, I recognize my failure even more. I continue to live with the guilt of not defying protocol, and crashing that gathering to accuse those leaders of aiding and abetting the killings by their inaction. The indescribable scale of human destruction and the betrayal of Rwanda during those 100 days required no less.