

Opinion

French Guns, Rwandan Blood

Frank Smyth

New York Times, April 14, 1994

HAWTHORNE, N.J. The horrendous violence that has seized the tiny African republic of Rwanda is not as random as it looks. For the members of the Akazu, the ruling clan around the late President Juvenal Habyarimana, the only way to retain a 21-year monopoly on power was to kill their enemies as fast as they could. And until yesterday, when anti-Government rebels overran the capital of Kigali, that brutal clique was getting help from an unlikely quarter : France.

Rwanda was a Belgian protectorate until it gained independence in 1962, and until recently it got most of its military aid from Belgium. But Belgian law prohibits any lethal aid to a country at war. In 1975, two years after he seized power by deposing the President who had appointed him, Mr. Habyarimana signed a military cooperation agreement with France. When the rebel guerrillas of the Rwanda Patriotic Front (harbored and largely armed by neighboring Uganda) invaded in 1990 and again last year, it was France that rushed in combat troops, mortars and artillery to help the Government.

Why France? Rwanda is "nobody's idea of a choice colonial prize," as *The Economist* tartly put it. It has few resources, little industry and a lot

of AIDS. Like its neighbor Burundi, it has been torn by decades of ethnic strife between the Hutu and the Tutsi. But French is an official language – even though one in six adults are fluent in it – and that counts for a great deal. France has invested heavily in Francophone Africa and provides military and financial aid to a network of its own former colonies. Mr. Habyarimana was a friend of President Francois Mitterrand. France's commitment to the Habyarimana regime was underscored by its recent subsidy of Rwanda's purchase of \$6 million in arms from Egypt. A contract signed in Kigali in 1992 includes a full arsenal of mortars, long-range artillery, plastic explosives and automatic rifles. Payment was guaranteed by the nationalized French bank Credit Lyonnais. Nor has France had much to say about Rwanda's atrocious record on human rights. Mr. Habyarimana – who died with the President of Burundi in a suspicious plane crash last week – was a classic despot, ruthless and corrupt. He installed relatives and cronies in key ministries, the Army and a paramilitary militia. (This group is known as the Akazu.) When the rebels, who are largely Tutsi, invaded in 1990, the Akazu incited a policy of ethnic clean-

sing. Carrying placards of Mr. Habyarimana above their heads, local officials and militiamen organized mobs of agitated Hutu. They killed thousands of Tutsi, while Tutsi killed hundreds of Hutu. Victims were hacked to death with machetes. Last August, Rwanda and the rebels agreed to end their three-year war, and six months later the President agreed to a transitional government, dividing ministerial posts three ways : among the Akazu, Hutu opposition parties led by Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana, and Tutsi representatives. Among these groups, the Akazu was the most reluctant to share power. Hours after the President was killed last Wednesday, his Presidential Guard went on a rampage. They killed Prime Minister Uwilingiyimana, along with Belgian peacekeepers who had tried to save her ; most other opposition party members ; priests and nuns, journalists and human rights monitors. Militiamen and soldiers under

irregular command randomly attacked Tutsi or anyone suspected of being one. Now the Government forces are in retreat, killing and burning as they flee. If the rebels take control, they have said that they will share power with other parties ; the world will have to wait to see.

For now, the horror in Rwanda should serve as a grisly lesson in the dangers of imperial reach. Of 21 French-speaking African regimes, most are dictatorships with scant respect for human rights. In January, when France devalued the currency used by 14 of these nations, it sent a welcome signal that it would cut back its subsidy of their economies. But its military policy lags behind its economic one ; in propping up the Rwandan regime for so long, it bears part of the blame for the current bloodbath.

Frank Smyth is author of "Arming Rwanda," a report released in January by Human Rights Watch.