

Rwanda's genocide could have been prevented.
The UN let people die and now it watches as the
survivors die

Lindsey Hilsum

The Observer, March 28, 2004

Ten years ago one million Rwandans perished in the worst genocide since the Second World War. Lindsey Hilsum, of The Observer, was the only British journalist in Kigali as the killing began. Here she reports on her return to witness the grim legacy of the terrible events of April 1994

Ten years ago, I listened to the gunfire outside my house in Kigali and wondered if I would survive. A plane carrying the Rwandan president, Juvénal Habyarimana, had been shot down and I dared not imagine the consequences. As the days went by, I learnt that danger lay in the quiet times when bands of killers roamed the capital. Friends called, begging me to save them.

'They're outside – I can see the bodies of my neighbours,' sobbed one. 'We've locked ourselves in the house. We're just waiting to die.' I hear their voices still. The friends who rang were Tutsis, Rwanda's ethnic minority. The thugs, armed with machetes and clubs, were from the Hutu majority. Their aim was to wipe out the Tutsis, to leave no trace.

Memory reduces horror to discon-

nected images : a baby's leg half severed by a machete ; mutilated bodies of four women buzzing with flies ; blood running in a gutter. Driving through roadblocks manned by drunken soldiers and militiamen from the Interahamwe, the group which spearheaded the killing.

In Butare, the second city, I interviewed its leader, Robert Kajuga. 'It's a war against the Tutsis – they want to take power,' he said. Asked why his men killed children, he replied, 'We defended ourselves. Even 11-year-old children came with grenades.' It was a lie. The Interahamwe killed anyone, just for being Tutsi. They were 'snakes and cockroaches' to be exterminated.

World leaders now accept that what happened was genocide, and that they merely watched. In the first week, after Rwandan government soldiers murdered 10 Belgian peacekeepers, the United Nations left, leaving the Tutsis to their fate. For 100 days, the killers did their work unfettered. At the end, maybe 800,000 were dead.

The global organisation to commemorate the tenth anniversary inevitably uses the slogan, 'Never Again'. But people are dying still. The Inter-

ahamwe often spared women from immediate killing, but kept them to rape. Militiamen hid women from their comrades in the cramped space between the ceiling and roof of a house, so they were called 'women of the ceiling'. Many were gang-raped several times a day for weeks.

They emerged traumatised and too ashamed to say what happened. Now the genocide has caught up with them, as they die a slow, agonising death from Aids.

'The world is watching again,' said Esther Mujawayo, a survivor and co-founder of Avega, a widows' association started after the genocide. 'If you have not protected someone in 1994, at least stop her from dying now. The UN just let people die, and now it's watching as the survivors die.'

This month, Esther took me through Kigali's outskirts to the small, wattle house of tiny, frail Hadija Murakatete, who looked as though she might fall over and never get up. 'The Interahamwe hacked my family with machetes,' Hadija said. Her husband and other family died.

'They took me and did whatever they liked – soldiers, Interahamwe, all of them.' Hadija and another woman were kept for weeks. She cannot remember how many times she was raped, nor by how many men. She does remember who betrayed her. 'This woman knew me. She was a relative of the Interahamwe and said I should be killed because I had the children of a snake. She wanted them to kill me. Instead they raped me.'

Now Hadija dares not return to her village. Although the worst rapists and murderers are in jail, their relatives threaten her and her three children.

'They look at my children with ha-

tred. In fact, one wanted to poison them, but the person she told to do it came and warned me.' In Kigali, Hadija has no income and soon will have nowhere to live. The landlord lets her stay for free in a little house, but he is knocking it down to build a bigger house for rent. 'I'm getting sick now and I keep thinking : when I'm dead, what will happen to my children?'

The answer is that another survivor, another rape victim, will look after them. According to the Survivors Fund, a London-based aid agency, genocide widows look after an average of seven orphans each. If Hadija were treated with anti-retroviral drugs (ARVs), she could look after her children for a few more years. But only a handful of Rwanda's rape victims get ARVs.

Two years ago, Clementine Gahongayire was worse off than Hadija. She had started to lose her sight and could scarcely walk. 'In the day I thought I would die before nightfall and at night I thought I would die before sunrise,' she said. She can scarcely bear to repeat her story. Seized by the Interahamwe in early April 1994, she was gang-raped daily for three months. 'It was routine,' she said. 'They lined us up and took us by force every day.'

Today Clementine is plump and reasonably healthy, because of ARVs. Her eyesight has improved, she works as a driver for a government ministry and brings up five orphans. Her own three children were murdered. Clementine was one of 14 women interviewed on film in 2001 to raise money for Comic Relief. £55 million was donated for projects in Africa and Britain, of which £434,000 has so far gone to the widows' association in Rwanda and another £250,000 was used to buy ARVs

for the 14 women and eight of their relatives. Yet Avega has 7,800 rape victims on its books who are dying of Aids. No one has come forward with the estimated £75 a month per woman needed to provide ARVs and medical care.

'In Kigali we have now the doctors and the medicines,' said Esther Mujawayo, who trained as a counsellor to help fellow survivors. 'People here with Aids who have money are not dying, but these women cannot afford the drugs.'

Worse, the UN is providing free ARVs to the suspected leaders of the genocide, in jail at its tribunal on Rwanda in Tanzania.

In Rwanda today, the survivors are a small, weak community. Most are poor, they have lost their families, houses and any other assets they had. Those who lived in villages in Rwanda's beautiful green hills have moved to the towns, where they can support each other. Many are neither physically nor mentally capable of holding down a job. They are trapped between Hutus who killed their families – many of whom are being freed from prison – and Tutsis who have returned from exile since 1994.

The massacres were not stopped by foreign soldiers, but by a rebel army, previously based in Uganda, called the Rwandese Patriotic Front. The children of Tutsis forced into exile when Rwanda gained independence in 1959, they drove out the genocidal government and seized power.

Thousands of Tutsis are now back from other countries – Uganda, Burundi, Britain, Canada. With confidence born of perfect English, good education and government favour, they have established businesses. Others

have made money illegally, from looting gold, diamonds and the mineral coltan from the Democratic Republic of Congo where Rwandan troops have joined a seven-year civil war.

Kigali has become prosperous. Shopfronts advertise 'African Business Solutions' while mobile phone shops and internet cafes are on every street. A five-star hotel has just been completed, while a new elite is building palatial houses with satellite dishes, pools and high-security walls.

Guilt over their failure to stop the killings spurred donors – especially Britain, the US and the Netherlands – to back the Rwandan government, despite its poor human rights record and involvement in plundering the Congo.

This month, a six-year inquiry by the French judicial authorities suggested that the Tutsi-led rebel movement, the Rwanda Popular Front (RPF), under the command of Rwanda's current president, Paul Kagame, shot down Habyarimana's plane and triggered the genocide – an allegation his government denies. Whatever the truth, although the diaspora Tutsis were not genocide victims they are able to claim victimhood and immunity, because they come from the same ethnic group and at least acted to stop it.

The survivors often find their new rulers insensitive. The Widows' Association does not know what to do for Christine Umuraza. She is 30, half-blind, and wild with grief and pain. I watched as its officials wrestled with her on a steep, rutted street, unable to calm her. She had been slashed with a machete, hit on the head, thrown into a hole and raped. Now she is dying of Aids.

Nuns had provided a house for her and her seven-year-old daughter,

Mamie Ingabire. This year, as more middle-class people from the diaspora demanded better houses, Kigali city council expropriated the land on which Christine's home had been built. She came back one day to find men demolishing it, while her daughter screamed inside. The workmen were Hutus.

Christine, crazed with the fear that genocide had started again, managed to save Mamie but lost her mind. Homeless and dying, she roams the neighbourhood, whimpering and laughing.

While the government advertises help for the victims, many individual diaspora Tutsis are suspicious of survivors. At 14, Beatha Uwazaninka was held at a roadblock while the Interahamwe murdered Tutsis ahead of her. Somehow she broke free and hid in the bush. When the killing was over, her entire family had been murdered. A Tutsi family just arrived from Uganda took her in.

'They used to call me "petit Bagosora," she said. Colonel Theoneste Bagosora was the main architect of the massacres. He is now on trial at the war crimes tribunal in Arusha. 'They would say, "Petit Bagosora, fetch the water"?' Being alive attracted suspicion, as if the morally correct position was to have died.

Government policy is to quash all reference to Hutus and Tutsis, saying all are citizens. Yet the divisions cannot be forgotten for some imposed reconciliation – a word much favoured by government and aid donors alike.

The survivors' greatest fear is Hutus being released from jail. Aid agencies and other nations have criticised Rwanda for imprisoning tens of thousands of Hutus without trying them. Now it is using traditional justice, called gacaca, in which those who confess

in prison are freed to face a village tribunal. Mass murderers and rapists will stay in jail, but members of the killing bands will be liberated.

At Gahwiji, a village an hour's drive from Kigali, they gathered under a huge tree for a gacaca session. Of 421 adults in the village, 80 are genocide suspects.

Forty-five Tutsis lived here. The five survivors have fled to a nearby town. With no one to testify against the suspects, the killers implicate each other. The 19 judges, all Hutu villagers, face about 200 neighbours while a young man elected for his fair-mindedness directs proceedings.

A lanky man in a striped shirt is called from the crowd and accused of participating in a patrol which killed several Tutsis. He denies it. 'He's lying,' says another man. 'He just wants to escape blame. I was on that patrol. We were together.'

Furogence Gasana confessed in prison, and is now ready to implicate others. 'I didn't kill anyone myself,' he told me later. 'I hit a woman but she didn't die.'

Like most former prisoners, he blamed the government of the time. 'We had to hunt down the enemy and we were told the enemy was the Tutsis. But I began to feel in my heart that what I had done was wrong.'

It is hard to tell how genuine is such remorse. In 1994, the collective pressure was to kill, but now it is to confess. Rwandan society demands obedience to power.

The law says rapists should stay in prison and go through the judicial process, not face gacaca. Few confess, and women are reluctant to accuse them. At 'gacaca it would be said in public. No one is daring to say, "This one ra-

ped me'. It is like a terrible secret between you and him,' said Esther Muja-wayo.

The government has commissioned elaborate memorials and invited world leaders to a ceremony on 7 April to mark the day the genocide began. No one who was there can forget the horror of those days, but the survivors suffer not only because they are haunted by their memories, but from the poverty and fear they now endure.

The women dying of Aids know they have no future. 'We encourage them to have an HIV test, but sometimes I think it's better they don't

know because we don't have the means of stopping them dying,' said Esther. She believes that as the price of anti-retroviral drugs drops, the international organisations which did nothing to help Rwandans in 1994 should provide them for the raped women.

'Genocide is a crime that should have been prevented,' she said. 'The people who let us down should repair their mistakes.'

· Lindsey Hilsum is international editor of Channel 4 News, which will broadcast her first film on Rwanda tomorrow at 7pm.