

Troops ignore killing

French ‘turned blind eye’ to Tutsi massacre

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French troops sent to Rwanda on a humanitarian mission ignored the pleas of wounded Tutsis, leaving 1,000 people to be slaughtered by Hutu killers.

Photo : French troops guard Tutsi survivors emerging from hiding in the Rwandan bush after a massacre of 1,000 by Hutus in June 1994 [on en voit une dizaine en haillons, armés de bâtons, souriants]

French troops sent to Rwanda on a humanitarian mission ignored the pleas of wounded Tutsis, leaving 1,000 people to be slaughtered by Hutu killers working as guides for the french during the 1994 genocide.

The killings, which could have been averted if the French troops had heeded the appeals of the Tutsis, are disclosed in a few sentences of a harrowing report published today by Africa Rights, a London-based human rights organisation.

The troops, Marine commandos under the command of Captain Marin Gillier, had been told of the plight of the Tutsis in Bisesero, a hillside hamlet near lake Kivu, by “The Times” on the day they arrived in Rwanda on June 26, 1994, as part of Operation Turquoise, a humanitarian mission backed by the United Nations. The aim of the mission led by the French was to prevent continuing massacres of Tutsis and Hutu moderates. But events at the time and subsequent revelations, which have prompted the French Government to open a parliamentary inquiry into the actions of its troops in Rwanda, indicate a high level of collusion with the Hutu killers. “The Times” gave the map coordinates of Bisesero to the French and said, after a frightening tour of the area : “Large numbers of Tutsis are being killed as we speak. You must go in and stop them.” This encounter was

filed and broadcast by CNN.

The French commandos did drive into Bisesero. But they did nothing to save lives. Instead, they entered the area accompanied by people identified as leading members of the Interahamwe, the genocidal hutu militia, and at first refused to believe that the Tutsis were in danger. Hutu leaders had told Captain Gillier that the Tutsis were “infiltrators” from the Tutsi-led rebels of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF).

According to Rakiya Omaar, director of Africa Rights, who interviewed survivors of the Bisesero massacres and has compiled the most authoritative work on the genocide, the Tutsis of Bisesero numbered only 2,000 on July 26. There had been 50,000 Tutsis in the region before the killings began. They had been defending themselves since April, when the genocide was triggered by the shooting-down over Kigali of a plane carrying President Habyarimana of Rwanda, a Hutu, and President Ntaryamira of Burundi. According to reports this week in “Le Figaro”, Sam 16 missiles used to bring down the plane came from French stocks.

“The French troops arrived in Bisesero and were flagged down by a survivor, a teacher. He told them what was happening and bravely argued with people such as Alfred Musema [now facing a UN war crimes tribunal in Arusha],” Ms Ommar said yesterday. “The French did not believe him until he called others out of the woods who emerged with terrible wounds, more dead than alive. The teacher was told that the French would return in three days, effectively telling the killers how much time they had to continue killing”, she added. When the French re-

turned to Bisesero four days later, according to Ms Ommar's report, the Hutus had killed nearly 1,000 of the survivors.

But even on June 30th, the French had no intention of helping the Tutsis. Captain Gillier told "The Times" that he was going on a mission to "secure the area against the RPF". His men went to Bisesero, drove past the Tutsis, and met up with leading members of the Interahamwe. On a hill overlooking Bisesero, where Tutsis lay dead and bleeding, Captain Gillier called in a helicopter to bring biscuits to Hutus. It was not until he came under pressure from other journalists that he agreed to send his men to rescue the Tutsis of Bisesero.

"Musema came and survivors told the French that this man was a killer. The French asked people to testify and then they let him go.", Jean Magazi [Muragizi] told Africa Rights. This pattern was repeated throughout Rwanda; In Cyangugu, in the south, French troops released several hundreds notorious killers before they withdrew at the end of Operation Turquoise.

*** Kigali : Militiamen armed with knives have killed nine Hutus in three villages in central Rwanda, it was reported yesterday. An official blamed Hutu militiamen hiding in forest bases. (Reuters)