

Nightly Persecution of the Whispering Tutsi Nuns

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Many nights over these past weeks a group of nuns has been forced from their rooms overlooking the town to which they have dedicated themselves, lined against a wall and told they are about to be shot.

Sometimes their fellow sisters beg, or shout at, the young men waving automatic weapons. Sometimes they give them money. Each time the nuns have returned to their beds wondering whether the next night will be their last.

The sisters of St Marie of Namur are prisoners in their own convent on a hillside in Kibuye, a Rwandan town ensconced beside Lake Kivu. For two months they have rarely emerged because, alongside the American, British and Belgian nuns there are 23 Tutsi sisters.

They are perhaps the only survivors of the town's entire Tutsi population. Virtually all have been murdered : about 10,000 people – one in five of the population.

The nuns are effectively captives of the town's prefect, Kayishema Clement, its military commander and a Rwandan government complicit in genocide.

Attempts to rescue them have been held up by the interim president's failure to provide permission. Even United States government pressure has so far failed to extricate the nuns.

The sisters are now looking to the newly arrived French troops as their saviours.

On Friday, a group of French soldiers arrived in Kibuye on a reconnaissance mission and visited the sisters to see if they were safe. The troops were lifted out by helicopter but another French convoy set off for Kibuye yesterday.

That the women have survived this long is something of a miracle. In the days following the death of

President Juvenal Habyarimana on April 6, the pattern of killing in Kibuye was much the same as the rest of Rwanda. The army and militias went house to house seeking out prominent Tutsis.

Some were shot, but victims were just as likely to be clubbed or hacked to death. Others made a dash for it. Many will have made it no further than the roadblocks encircling the town. Some did manage to escape to Zaire, but most Tutsis hid.

After 10 days of carnage, radio broadcasts promised protection for Tutsis who gathered at Kibuye's church or football pitch. Thousands arrived – the church must have seemed particularly inviting. But it is where the first were to die.

A witness said there were so many people to kill that the army handed out guns to the crowds of men thirsting to murder. The witness estimated 3,000 people died at the church, slaughtered by uniformed troops, the militia and others. Even more people died at the football pitch.

Collectively, the nuns describe weeks of terror and fatigue at the hands of the militia. Emotional and psychological pressure has clearly taken its toll.

Even within their own convent they whisper at night. Their only protection is four Hutu men with sticks who melt away at the sight of guns.

The sisters' fate has lain with the same people blamed for instigating Kibuye's massacres. Mr Clement, has refused them permission to leave town, perhaps himself fearing reprisals.

But he has deigned to spare their lives. Perhaps, even in the climate of Kibuye today, enough people would be outraged if they were killed because of their popularity as teachers.

Mr Kayishema was not available to discuss the sub-

ject, and his army commander was openly hostile.

Some of the sisters are reluctant to leave even if the opportunity presents itself, fearing that they will not be permitted to return and continue schooling local children.