

We had no chance of escape, says woman who lost husband, all her six children in Genocide

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Yozaфина Murebwayire

NAIROBI – A woman who lost her husband and all six children during the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda has said her family tried to escape ‘imminent danger’ beforehand but they were trapped inside their home in Gasabo District by militia.

“We attempted to escape but had no chance,” Yozaфина Murebwayire, 64, told a gathering of Rwandans, Kenyan officials, UN diplomats and members of diplomatic corps at the United Nations regional headquarters in the Kenyan capital of Nairobi yesterday.

Murebwayire, who also lost two brothers during the Genocide, said : “On the night of April 6, 1994 when the plane that was carrying (President Juvenal) Habyarimana was shot down, two soldiers and two Interahamwe militiamen came to our home and demanded us to produce the men who had downed the plane.”

“Of course, we told them we hid no one and had no idea of what they were saying. They then demanded for money and before they left, they said that those

coming to kill us were on their way”.

As killings unfolded, she said, “our Tutsi neighbours fled to our home, we told them that we were actually the primary targets and they responded to us saying that ‘we would rather die together’”.

Later, they decided to leave the home and headed to Ndera Minor Seminary where two Hutu priests welcomed them along with hundreds of other refugees.

Members of the Interahamwe militia disguised as refugees, she said, would also come to the seminary but armed with all sorts of weapons but the priests would ask them to first surrender their weapons.

“Many refused to surrender their weapons and went to report the priests to the then government soldiers, who later came and shot the priests, killing one,” she recalled.

The next day, on April 11, 1994, hundreds of militia descended on the seminary and asked all the Hutu in the crowd to leave.

“They would check on the national ID, and in case a Tutsi attempted to leave along with the Hutu, he or she would not go past the gate, they would hack them to death”.

What followed was unimaginable slaughter, she told the audience. “All my six children, my husband and two brothers died on the spot. Because I was soaked in a pool of blood with wounds all over my head, killers left me thinking I was dead. My daughter breathed her last as we held hands. When I regained my conscience I tried to shake her in vain, it was too late”.

“Of all the about 450 people who were hacked that day, I am the only person who survived,” she said, ad-

ding that she spent the following three weeks hiding in a toilet.

Separated from family

“At one point, Interahamwe militiamen came back in large numbers and one of them came to the same toilet where I was hiding. When he heard movement, he ran back shouting at the top of his voice, telling his colleagues that RPA soldiers had arrived in the area. They all ran away at once.”

The Rwanda Patriotic Army (RPA) was the military wing of the Rwanda Patriotic Front, which would later stop the Genocide and liberate the country on July 4, 1994.

Indeed, a few days later, she said, “RPA soldiers arrived in the area and that’s how I survived. They took me to their base in Byumba (now in Gicumbi, northern Rwanda) and treated me.”

In 1961, a young Murebwayire and her parents had fled from their ancestral home in Kamonyi amid a spike in violence against the Tutsi. However, she was forcefully separated from her family by a man who took her to his home and warned her against ever trying to escape.

“My parents fled to Burundi while I remained behind against my will. That family looked after me, they gave me an education, but they also treated me as a tourist attraction. People would come from different places to come to see how a Tutsi looked like, I was emotionally drained for so many years,” she recalled.

I came to know that I actually had a family outside Rwanda on the eve of my wedding in 1975, she said. Her family had initially fled to Burundi before crossing over to Tanzania.

“I appeal to the United Nations to learn from our tragedy in Rwanda and ensure that no such thing happens anywhere in the world again,” she told the gathering, which also included senior UN diplomats.

She thanked the current Rwandan government for promoting reconciliation and building a country that treats all its citizens equally.

Justice, Genocide denial

Rwanda’s High Commissioner to Kenya Amb. James Kimonyo thanked United Nations for recognising what happened in Rwanda in 1994 as genocide against a particular group.

“I take this opportunity to express our gratitude to the United Nations General Assembly for finally adopting the resolution recognising that what happened in Rwanda between April 7 and July 1994 was Genocide against the Tutsi,” he said.

The envoy called on nations around the world to act against Genocide denial and help bring perpetrators to book.

“Many fugitives who committed this heinous crime in Rwanda are still at large, in your respective countries. Rwanda has done its part by sending indictments to different capitals seeking their extradition,” he told members of the diplomatic corps present.

He added : “If we are really serious about our collective pledge of fighting the culture of impunity, I humbly call on you to support us in making these individuals face justice by either extraditing them to Rwanda or at least take them through domestic prosecution though Rwandans would prefer the trials to take place in Rwanda where the crimes were committed”.

“I would like also to mention the issue of trivialisation and denial of Genocide. I know many European countries have enacted stringent laws to fight Holocaust denial. Without comparing the magnitudes of the two crimes, we call upon these countries to enact same laws to fight the denial of other genocides, including the Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda,” Kimonyo said.

In his address, the Principal Secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Trade of Kenya, Amb. Macharia Kamau, who was the chief guest, lauded the people of Rwanda for their “fortitude and resilience” after the tragedy that befell the country 24 years ago.

“On this day of remembrance, Kenya joins the people of Rwanda to honour the memory of the victims who perished in the Genocide, and, salute the people of Rwanda, especially the survivors, for their tremendous courage and resilience in their unyielding

journey of healing, reconciliation and national recovery,” he said.

He added : “We laud Rwanda’s astute leadership and resolute political will which has been at the centre of the transformed governance and socio-economic fabric of the Rwandan society.”

The commemoration event, which was also characterised by commemoration songs and poems, attracted members of diplomatic corps, United Nations staff, members of Rwandan community in Kenya, and friends of Rwanda.