

Runyinya: “The Massacre to End All Massacres”, 21 April

“We could have fought back successfully against traditional weapons, but not against firearms.”

More people were killed at the Catholic Parish of Karama, situated in sector Karama, commune of Runyinya, and in the commune office of Runyinya, than in any other massacre which *African Rights* has investigated since April 1994. According to the bourgmestre¹, the corpses of 65,000 victims of the massacre were discovered and given a decent burial in 1995. The slaughter, which one survivor described as “the massacre to end all massacres”, took place on 21 April and was strictly a military affair carried out by soldiers from Camp Ngoma. Well-armed soldiers shot and threw grenades non-stop from 10:00 a.m. until about 3:30 p.m. when they returned to Butare to seek additional ammunition. Their departure allowed the survivors to escape, moving in the direction of Burundi.

Thousands of Tutsi refugees converged on Runyinya from 7 April onwards. They came mostly from Gikongoro, the neighbouring region where the genocide began immediately after the death of President Habyarimana. They came in particular from the communes of Rwamiko, Kivu and Mubuga², and Mudaramura and Musebeya. Word had spread in Gikongoro that the Tutsi préfet of Butare, Jean-Baptiste Habyarimana, was anxious to maintain peace in his region and that under his instructions, the bourgmestre of Runyinya, Déo Hategekimana, had provided security and food for the refugees. But there were also the Tutsis of Runyinya itself and the communes of Huye, Nyakizu and Maraba in Butare.

The bourgmestre drove around Runyinya, urging Tutsis to assemble at the commune office. Many of the refugees had suffered hideous injuries after huge massacres had taken place at the Parish of Kibeho on 15 April and the Parish of Cyahinda on 18 April. They continued to pour into Runyinya until the 19th, hoping that the préfet, who was a native of Runyinya, would continue to limit the genocide in Butare. The refugees also knew that they could count on practical and moral support from the local priest, Fr. François Ngomirakiza, himself a Tutsi. There were so many refugees, more than 70,000—and their belongings and cattle—that they were spread between the parish, the office of the commune and the post-primary school of CERAI. Emile Karuranga, a trader in Runyinya, is one of the people who registered the refugees. On the 19th, he said their figure was 75,405, and added that “of course people kept coming that evening and night, so the morning of the 20th, the final figure was higher.” Fearful of losing sight of their relatives in this “sea of people”, the refugees organised themselves sector by sector.

From 13 April, interahamwe from Gikongoro led attacks on the sectors of Ramba and Mbasa. But they were thwarted by the 11 gendarmes the préfet sent from the gendarmerie base in Tumba, and by the joint patrols set up by Hutus and Tutsis in a number of places. The préfet visited the refugees on the 17th, asking them to remain calm and promising them that the gendarmes from Tumba would protect them.

On the 19th, the refugees realised that the genocide was, in the words of a teacher, “a national objective” when they heard Sindikubwabo’s speech on the radio and learned that Jean-Baptiste Habyarimana had been dismissed. Some tried to make it to Burundi in time, but returned when they found their route barred by the interahamwe. As their anguish increased, they understood that the bourgmestre had looked after them because of pressure from the préfet, and, François Semushi said, “because he wanted to make sure that no-one would get away.” The refugees’ situation deteriorated sharply; food supplies began to dwindle and the water supply to the parish and the commune office was cut off. As a precautionary measure, Fr. Ngomirakiza drove pregnant women and the wounded to the University Hospital. The gendarmes, who had come to protect the refugees, stopped any Tutsis leaving the parish or the commune office, and began teaching local Hutus how to use firearms. Séraphine Mukabyusa described the mood of the refugees.

We were surrounded, so much so that we could not even go to draw water. Those who tried were beaten and threatened. We became more and more afraid, but the bourgmestre kept assuring us not to worry, saying that nothing would happen to us.³

¹ Interviewed in November 1995.

² For details of this exodus, see *Witness to Genocide* Issue 10, June 1999.

³ Interviewed 30 November 1995.

The final showdown took place on the morning of Thursday 21 April when soldiers from Camp Ngoma took up positions around the parish, the commune office and CERAI. Antoine Segatwa, 70, a farmer, noticed their black berets and said that “soldiers in particular, and communal policemen, are the main people responsible for the killings.” The communal policemen he named include the head of the communal police force, Athanase Niyonsaba and Gatibiya. Joseph Ndorereho, a farmer detained in Runyinya, agrees.

The kick-off for the killings was given by soldiers who came from Butare. When the soldiers arrived here, they fired into the refugees at the commune office, the parish, and the health centre. There were a lot of victims. They were helped in the massacres by some communal policemen.⁴

Damien Rusagara, 53, the councillor of sector Karama, was one of the refugees at Karama at the time.

On 21 April, soldiers from Butare surrounded our commune. Then they fired on us. The soldiers were supported by Runyinya’s communal policemen and local residents armed with traditional weapons. The soldiers were armed with guns and hand grenades, while the police had guns. Many thousands of people died in that attack, which began at 10:00 a.m. and lasted until 3.30 p.m. when the soldiers realised they had run out of ammunition. Their commander ordered them to stop firing and return quickly to Butare to get more ammunition. I could hear what he said, and that is why I can confirm that those soldiers came from Butare. Before returning to the city, the soldiers ordered the interahamwe to kill those who had escaped the bullets, and finish off the wounded. The responsibility for what happened in my commune lies with the soldiers from Butare.⁵

François Semushi became separated from his wife when fear made him leave his home in Kinazi on the 13th, taking his oldest two children. A teacher, he was appointed bourgmestre after the genocide.

Unknown to us, we had already been surrounded. We knew we were going to die, but we tried to die valiantly. Some killed while others set the buildings on fire at the same time. We were running through a hail of bullets. The women and children were crying and the wounded were groaning. It was really horrific. No-one knew where their relatives were, because of the general panic. I managed to hide in a bush for one and a half hours. I had no idea what had happened to my family. They went on shooting until they ran out of ammunition at about 3:30 p.m when they went back to Butare for more. Some of us seized the chance to flee to Burundi.

François reached the border at about 8:00 p.m. and was lucky to find his family, but could no longer speak.

We didn’t even say hello to one another. I was just too scared to say anything.⁶

His wife, Bernadette Mukantabuye, had reached the commune office on the 14th, with their three youngest children. Bernadette, the director of schools in Karama, is a native of Mpanda in Runyinya.

On Thursday, 21 April, an army vehicle came here twice, bringing in soldiers from Butare. There were a large number of them; people thought there were around 60, including the three gendarmes who had remained here at the commune office.

By midday, the interahamwe and other civilians had surrounded us at a radius of 200 metres. The soldiers opened fire on us and kept on firing. I was in the nutritional centre classroom with my youngest children. There were a lot of women teachers in there with me. My husband was outside with the other two children. The attack went on all day. Anyone who tried to escape the gunfire was killed by the interahamwe who were all around the building and in the sorghum fields.

The soldiers had run out of ammunition by the afternoon. That gave us a chance to get out of there. We left for Burundi that night.⁷

⁴ Interviewed 27 May 1999.

⁵ interviewed 27 May 1999.

⁶ Interviewed 15 October 1999.

⁷ Interviewed 15 October 1999.

The passage of time has done nothing to distance Straton Munyankindi from the memory of what took place in Runyinya on 21 April 1994. In late 1999, he said that “he remained shocked and bewildered by what happened.” Aged 59 and the parish secretary, he comes from Umuyange in sector Karama.

We heard an explosion in the marketplace, and another at the commune. People dressed in banana leaves suddenly rushed up and surrounded us. I saw the communal policeman, Athanase Niyonsaba, with his gun, and six gendarmes from Butare. I recognised one of them as Minan’s son who came from our area and had recently got married at the Parish of Karama. They threw hand grenades at us and fired their guns, while those who tried to escape were killed by the interahamwe. They spared no-one, not even the babies. They plundered as well as killing. There were other civilians lurking in the bush. I got out at about 4:00 p.m., together with François Semushi; Déo Kayitana; Emmanuel Mungaturite and my three sisters; Annonciata, Concessa and her husband, Frédéric Biraboneye, and Félicitée and her husband, Pascal.

My own family had headed for Nyakibanda while my companions and I were still fighting off the attacks. My wife died there with five of our children, as they were trying to get to Burundi.⁸

Vénantie Mutegaraba, 47, had a husband and eight children, but she now lives alone. Unable to convey her desolation, she simply said that she was “in a difficult situation.” She is a Hutu, but was married to a Tutsi farmer, Viateur Ndikunkigo. The family first hid in the Gishurati forest where they had their first encounter with soldiers from Butare.

There was a landing place for army helicopters in that forest, and a helicopter landed there three times in two days, bringing in soldiers from Butare. I saw them from 100 metres away. There were a lot of them, and they were armed to the teeth. They drove us out of the forest.

Vénantie and her family went to Karama, but she left their corpses there.

We suffered a concerted attack from several directions simultaneously. The civilians surrounded the Tutsis, while the soldiers from Butare opened fire on the refugees. There were women and girls among the civilians.

My husband and children died. I had stayed in a room full of bodies, and an interahamwe killed my little boy, but left me alive. I spent the whole night in that room among all those dead bodies.

The next day, a woman I didn’t know, made me go to Buhoro. I didn’t want to go there, not only because shrapnel wounds in my legs made it hard to walk, but because all I wanted to do was die. She took me to a man called Jean and he protected me until June.⁹

“What happened in Karama was the massacre to end all massacres”, was how Emile Karuranga summed up the enormity of the tragedy that unfolded in Runyinya.

It started at 10:30 a.m. on 21 April. The parish had been completely sealed off by communal policemen, gendarmes and military reservists. All of them were directly involved in the attack. In the meantime, interahamwe from Rwamiko, Nyakizu, Mubuga and from Maraba were waiting outside to machete whoever escaped.

Emile then described the massacre itself, unable to find words to describe the extent of the slaughter.

We tried to defend ourselves with stones. The bourgmestre himself was shooting into the refugees. They shot bullet after bullet. The parish rocked with the deafening explosions of grenades. They shot from 10:30 a.m. until they had run out of bullets. For hours and hours, there was an endless hail of bullets. Of course we had run out of stones long before they had run out of bullets.¹⁰

Fortunata Ngirabatware, 33, mother of two, lost her husband and father in massacres in Kibeho and then left for Runyinya where she found a parish “crammed with human beings.”

⁸ Interviewed 15 October 1999.

⁹ Interviewed 15 October 1999.

¹⁰ Interviewed 9 June 1994.

There were people everywhere—inside the church, the school and the compound. There was a sea of people.

The soldiers, she said, emptied their ammunition on this “sea of people.”

The soldiers took so long to shoot that they exhausted their ammunition. They returned to their barracks to fetch more ammunition. By that time, tens of thousands had been killed in all parts of the parish. It was a horrifying scene. Thousands of bodies lay in every twisted position you could imagine. There was just too much blood flowing. The dead were already dead, but the groans of the wounded, their howls of pain. Ah, that is just too terrible to think of. We left shortly after they went to see about more weapons.

Marie-Christine Libagiza, 28, and her sister, Marie-Louise Umwizerwa, 26, were among the refugees from Gikongoro who received a warm welcome in Runyinya when they arrived in Mbasa on the 9th. They transferred to the parish a week later. Both were secondary school students. Like all survivors from Runyinya, Marie-Christine and Marie-Louise were overwhelmed by the number of refugees they found in Runyinya.

Everywhere you looked, there were people, people and more people. In every room, in all corners of the church, in the compound. There were tens and tens of thousands of people.

As usual, the men had placed women and children in what they hoped would be a protected zone—inside the church. But the church, they said, became “full of gun smoke and the smell of blood.”

Powerful grenades and guns were used. It was the bourgmestre himself who started the shooting. The interahamwe of Rwamiko were ready with their machetes, accompanied by the bourgmestre of Rwamiko and the director of the tea plantation. The interahamwe of Gishamvu and Butare were all there. The attackers were very, very many.

We entered the church; others fled into the classrooms. It was mainly women and children who were put in the protected rooms. The men tried to fight back. But the only weapons they had were stones. They fought back until 2:00 p.m. The attackers left for a short while. While they were gone, the survivors fled in the direction of Burundi. But by then tens of thousands of people were already dead and thousands more could not move because they were wounded. Our family was extremely lucky. There were ten of us in the parish and we all survived. Only our maid was wounded.¹¹

Even when the killing started in earnest, the bourgmestre was still trying to lull the refugees into a false sense of security, as Séraphine Mukabyusa explained.

The bourgmestre encouraged the women and children to stay in the school and inside the church. He asked the men to stay in the courtyard, so they would continue to be visible. The various councillors asked us, the women, to sit sector by sector. Our own councillor, Fabien Ruhigangoga, from sector Buhoro, was one of those separating us sector by sector. Then they locked the rooms. Those who were outside—the men, young men and even some young women—were then massacred. They tried to defend themselves with stones. Sometimes, the peasant killers fled.

But the support of the soldiers gave the peasants the courage to return.

Then one of the soldiers would shoot in the direction of the Tutsis defending themselves. The killers would then return to finish them off if they were not already dead.

When they had almost finished off everyone outside, some people managed to break the locks and we ran out of the rooms. The soldiers, who had been reinforced, were still there. Hategekimana told us women to calm down, saying the killings were now finished and we had nothing to fear. We refused to stay and started walking towards Burundi.

Mungwakuzwe, also inside the church, was left stripped naked and her finger bones broken. Two of her sons were killed.

The church was full of people. The men put up a fight with stones. But later they came back with guns and shot many people. They also used explosives. There were too, too many who died. I lost two sons

¹¹ Interviewed together, 3 June 1994.

there. I covered them with grass and left. There were many dead bodies and people were trying to rescue some babies who were alive but lying among dead bodies. I wouldn't try to guess a number. There were too many.¹²

The pace of the killing was just as intense at the commune office. François Ntegano said that his extended family of 215 people occupied a hill; all of them were killed in the massacre, including his wife, son and grand-daughter. François, 78, a retired teacher from sector Kaburemera, had only been at the commune office for four hours when he heard the sound of the soldiers' vehicles. He and his family had lived in the forest from 15-21 April.

There was a large number of soldiers who collaborated with the interahamwe, and who had grenades. We threw stones at our aggressors and they shot into us, until they had exhausted their bullets at around 3:30 p.m. We immediately fled. Some people were burned alive in a house that belonged to the parish; from the skulls we gathered, about 50 people. They used petrol because even the roof tiles were burned.

The military chiefs who sent the reinforcement deserve serious punishment.¹³

Paul Rutaysire, a farmer who is from the same sector, also reached Karama a few hours before the massacre. He had tried to hide in a forest in Bisi bya Rukara but was forced out on 20 April by soldiers. He said that the gendarmes had been walking around to ensure that the refugees were not armed when "we realised that we were surrounded by a large number of soldiers."

They shot into us. The gunfire ceased between 3:30 p.m. and 4:00 p.m. We escaped when we saw that they had no more ammunition. If the soldiers had not intervened, the interahamwe could not have defeated us.

Rutaysire fled, but he left behind the corpses of his in-laws and many other relatives.¹⁴

Another man who lost almost his entire family at Karama is Martin Murindibigwi, 34, a peasant from the sector of Rusasa, commune Nyamugabe, Gikongoro. His wife and seven of his eight children were killed; only he and a 17-year-old son, a secondary school student in Cyahinda, survived.

When the soldiers returned to Butare to replenish their ammunition, the survivors who could walk immediately left for Burundi or for the forest. But the killers continued to pursue them, using dogs to track the people hiding in the forest. Some of those heading for Burundi were killed or injured by gendarmes and interahamwe despatched by the bourgmestre at Gatobwe, about nine kilometres from Runyinya. Emile Karuranga, who reached Gatobwe after they had accomplished their task, said he found "the place littered with dead bodies and hundreds of abandoned children crying over the bodies of their parents."

In subsequent days, soldiers and militiamen returned to Runyinya itself. After escaping the massacre of the 21st, Jean-Bosco Sangwa, 27, hid in a banana grove and then in his home in cellule Kaburemera. As a trader in Butare, Jean-Bosco was used to seeing soldiers buying provisions in the market. He was familiar with some of the soldiers who returned to Runyinya.

I remained in hiding in my cellule until the day I was severely beaten by some soldiers from ESO who had just killed old Ladislas Rukara. I recognised four of them, as men I used to see in Butare market. They wounded me in the left ear and in the ribcage and left me in a coma.¹⁵

When the soldiers returned from Butare, they did not find enough survivors to begin the massacre afresh. Instead, they had a drink to celebrate their work. They were served by Antoine Segatwa who sold sorghum and banana beer in sector Karama.

There were soldiers who were natives of this commune, including Jean Mbasange. He boasted that he had thrown a grenade which blew up 70 people at the parish. Many of them were boasting. There was also Vianney, son of Serugendo.

¹² Interviewed 11 June 1994.

¹³ Interviewed 25 May 1999.

¹⁴ Interviewed 27 May 1999.

¹⁵ Interviewed 15 October 1999.

The following day, Friday 22 April, Muvunyi took matters into his own hands in commune Mbazi.