

Strife in Rwanda: Evacuation; American Evacuees Describe Horrors Faced by Rwandans

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Foreign evacuees came out of Kigali, Rwanda, today, bearing horror stories of sweeping civil strife that left their Rwandan friends and neighbors slain or in hiding and fearing for their lives.

Many of the more than 170 Americans and Europeans who traveled in caravans to neighboring Burundi and were then flown here by United States military planes arrived shaken, with few belongings. But they brought many accounts of the days of bloodshed that began in Rwanda on Wednesday when the Presidents of Rwanda and Burundi were killed when their plane crashed at the Kigali airport, reportedly after being hit by a rocket.

"It was the most basic terror," said Chris Grundmann, 37, an American evacuee, describing the fears of the Rwandan civilians and officials who were targets of the violence. He and his family, hunkered down in their house with mattresses against the windows, heard the ordeals of Rwandan victims over a two-way radio.

"The U.N. radio was filled with national staff screaming for help," he said. "They were begging : 'Come save me! My house is being blown up,' or

'They're killing me.' There was nothing we could do. At one point we just had to turn it off."

Since Wednesday, it is estimated that more than 20,000 people have been killed in fighting between the Hutu majority and the Tutsi minority that have struggled for dominance since Rwanda won independence from Belgium in 1962. On Friday alone, the main hospital had many hundreds of bodies before noon. [Page A12.]

Mr. Grundmann, an official with the Centers for Disease Control, said members of the Tutsi ethnic group were among the worst hit in the first night of fighting.

The family's cook, a Tutsi, came to their home begging for help on Friday after having spent three days pretending to be dead.

"He told us that on Wednesday night someone had thrown a grenade into his home," Mr. Grundmann said in an interview here today. "He escaped through an open window, but he thinks his wife and children died. For 36 hours he played dead in a marsh. There were bodies all through the marsh. He said there were heads being thrown in."

“When we left, we gave him all the food in the house, and I showed him where he could hide in the rafters,” he continued. “He didn’t dare go out.”

No one has taken responsibility for the downing of the plane that killed the two Presidents, Juvenal Habyarimana of Rwanda and Cyprien Ntaryamira of Burundi. The Rwandan Government has accused the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front, made up mostly of Tutsis. It is still unclear who started the ensuing fighting and why they did it.

Cease-Fire on Saturday

The heaviest fighting started at first light on Thursday and concentrated first on one of the many hills of Kigali, in an area where Government ministers and many Americans lived. From Thursday until a cease-fire on Saturday morning, hardly any of those evacuated left their homes or hiding places, and those who did saw the bloodshed firsthand.

In the Rwandan capital, houses were broken into, shops were looted, and there were dead bodies in the streets. Marty Fields, a business manager for the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, said today after he was flown to Nairobi. Mr. Fields said he had seen Rwandan soldiers as well as civilians armed with machetes, spears, bows and arrows roaming the streets.

But what he remembers most vividly is a man on the side of the road, kneeling and begging for mercy from Rwandan soldiers. They shot the man three times in the head, he said.

The foreigners were in the middle of the violence, but most were immune from harm in the ethnic war.

For almost 36 hours, 13-year-old Hanne Steen, her parents and sister lay huddled in a hallway of their home while soldiers and looters threw grenades into the homes of their Rwandan neighbors in Kigali. “Thursday night was the worst time,” Hanne said. “There was no light, no telephone and gunshots throughout the night. I was so nervous. I couldn’t eat. I was nauseous. We were in the hallway with pillows over our heads to stop the noise. We could hear the bullets whistle over our heads.”

The American family ate candy and canned tuna fish and kept in touch with the outside world by two-way radio.

Hanne’s mother, Kathy Shapiro, who works for Unicef, said Rwandan co-workers reported that the streets were filled with bodies. “One staff member was forced by soldiers to put at least six bodies into a ditch,” she said.

Richard Steen, Hanne’s father, who works with an AIDS control and prevention project, said, “We just held the kids and told them we would get through it, that it was not aimed at us.”

Neighbors Hacked to Death

The attackers struck close to home, though. Among those who lost their lives were neighbors of the Steens – the family of a senior official – who were hacked to death.

Those evacuated today had left Kigali on Saturday just after noon in three car convoys organized by the American Embassy in Rwanda, and

the first arrived in the Burundi capital, Bujumbura, at about 9 :30 P.M. the same day.

Pia Chesnais, 36, a health contract worker for the United States Agency for International Development, was new to Kigali, and was without her family, a car or a radio when the fighting began. "There was a Rwandan colonel's house 500 yards from mine," said Mrs. Chesnais, who spent Thursday through Saturday holed up with a bag of rice, some honey and a case of beer. "People just started throwing grenades, rolling them under the door. I wasn't scared. I knew somebody would come get me."

She was rescued by a colleague with a car on Saturday morning. Her colleague, Dick Roberts, described their moment of fear. "At one point on the road a pickup approached with three soldiers," Mr. Roberts said. "One soldier had a rocket launcher. He kept it aimed right at us. There was nothing we could do except keep on driving very slowly. He came up to us and then he lowered it and smiled."

Intervention

Foreign Missions In African Lands Foreign forces have been sent into African nations many times in the last 30 years, following the end of colonial rule. Some of those instances follow :

1993 Rebels in Rwanda launch an offensive against the Government. France sends 700 troops to protect foreigners.

1992 A United Nations intervention

force lands in Somalia to protect relief efforts in a country where civil war is causing mass starvation.

1991 Zairian soldiers mutiny because they have not been paid. Belgium sends 800 paratroopers, and American military planes transport 1,200 French Foreign Legionnaires to evacuate 20,000 foreigners.

1990 The Rwandan Government and rebel soldiers wage battles that encroach on the capital, Kigali. French Foreign Legionnaires and Belgian paratroopers take the airport and evacuate nearly 1,000 Europeans and Americans.

1990 Rebel groups battle in Monrovia, Liberia's capital. American Marines rescue 2,400 foreigners in a seven-month operation.

1990 Rebels in Somalia fight to oust the dictator, Mohammed Siad Barre. United States Marines fly diplomats out, Italian troops rescue hundreds of expatriates, and a French frigate picks up 47 expatriates stranded on the coast.

1984 With American support, Israeli troops secretly evacuate 8,000 Ethiopian Jews from northern Ethiopia.

1976 Israel sends commandos to rescue hostages from a French airliner that has been hijacked by Palestinians and flown to Uganda.

1960 Belgian troops intervene in the Republic of the Congo, later Zaire, shortly after independence to protect Belgian nationals after an armed forces mutiny. A United Nations force intervenes after the provinces of Katanga secedes.