

Rwanda rebels say they fight to end ethnic hatred

Hartley, Aidan

Reuters, April 13, 1994

MULINDI, RWANDA, April 14 (Reuter) - Rwandan guerrillas battling government troops for the capital Kigali are a disciplined force whose cause was born out of four decades of bloodshed between rival Hutu and Tutsi tribes.

Many of the 20,000 Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) fighters are Tutsis who grew up in exile after their families fled uprisings by Hutus who overthrew the Tutsi monarchy in 1959.

But RPF leaders deny they are tribally motivated and say their aim is to abolish a system which promoted ethnic hatred under President Juvenal Habyarimana, killed in a plane crash a week ago.

"When this war started it was portrayed as a conflict between ethnic groups," RPF political figurehead, Alexis Kanyarengwe, himself a Hutu, told Reuters this week.

"The international community has ignored Habyarimana's deplorable record in office," he said.

As an example of this system, the rebels point to the identity cards which Rwandans are forced to carry and which include the owner's ethnic group.

The ethnic groups include the Tutsi, who were once the feudal overlords of Rwanda and traditionally kept cattle; the Hutu who were the serf class and farmers and the Twa tribe of pygmies who were hunter-gatherers.

However the three groups speak the same language and have the same culture, Rwandans say.

The RPF formed in exile in 1987 and known as Inkontanyi - which means resolution in the Rwandan language - invaded northern Rwanda from neighbouring Uganda as a 10,000-strong force on October 1 1990.

Some of the oldest supporters were veterans of six invasions by Tutsi exiles known by their enemies as the Inyenzi - the insect - during the 1960s.

The invasions had sparked ethnic reprisals against Tutsis which philosopher Bertrand Russell condemned in 1964 as "The most horrible and systematic human massacre we have had occasion to witness since the extermination of the Jews by Nazis."

But the bulk of the rebels including their chief Fred Rwigyema who was killed on the second day of the invasion has been hardened by years of fighting in the army of Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni.

One of their main aims has been to win the right of tens of thousands of refugees to return to Rwanda, a tiny and overpopulated nation of 7.5 million

which Habyarimana often said was “like a jug already full of water.”

“We came home and found the doors closed in our faces,” were the words of a war song chanted by foot-stamping rebels at the battlefield in the misty hills this week.

The highly mobile force of rebels follow a strict code of discipline and is armed with AK-47 rifles, mortars and anti-aircraft guns which they use against infantry units.

They have been backed by Uganda and are funded by contributions from exiles which have paid for their own radio station and a team of 40 field doctors, say experts on the movement.

Fighting a well equipped army and regrouping after Fred Rwigyema under Major-General Paul Kagame, the RPF spent months hiding under a string of volcanoes where Rwanda’s celebrated gorillas live.

Their ranks were swelled by recruits from Rwanda as well as from Burundi, Tanzania and Zaire.

They gained ground in a series of offensives up to February last year but signed a peace accord with Habyarimana and other opposition parties at internationally-brokered peace talks in August 1993.

The accord allowed for a new all-party government to rule Rwanda ahead of multi-party polls in 1995, the integration of RPF into the national army and the repatriation of refugees.

The accord barely got off the ground before Habyarimana was killed and rebels began streaming down through the steep valleys in a bid to flush out government forces and restore order.

RPF officials say they want to adhere to the nine-month-old peace accord and set up a new all-party transitional government but they also promise to ban hardline parties which promote ethnic hatred.

(c) Reuters Limited 1994