

Rwanda priest recounts atrocities.

Jonathan Clayton

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GAHINI, Rwanda, May 7 (Reuter) – Father Oreste Incimata was looking forward to a quiet week in the remote parish of Kabarondo.

He was making final preparations for the baptism of some adult converts among his peasant flock, a mix of men and women from the Hutu and Tutsi tribes.

He first heard the news of President Juvenal Habyarimana's death on April 6 in a rocket attack on his plane at Kigali airport on a late evening broadcast on Radio Rwanda.

"People were afraid and stayed home, they seemed to have a feeling that something terrible was going to happen," he told Reuters.

That night, one wounded man arrived at the compound. By morning, he had been joined by another thousand.

"They said they were being attacked by the Hutus," he said.

Over the next hours they were joined by several hundred more Tutsi peasants, seeking sanctuary in the church and its grounds.

But their nightmare was just beginning.

One afternoon a few days later, the feared Interahamwe militia – armed militants from Habyarimana's Mouvement Republicain National Pour Le Developpement (MRND) – turned up.

"Soldiers and gendarmes were with

them, inciting them. They took all the men away first and killed them. But when they had finished they came back and started with the women and children," said Oreste.

Of some, 1,500 people in the church compound, Oreste said he believed only a couple of hundred survived.

"Those that ran away were moved down by the army or hacked to death by the militias," he said.

The priest's tale is typical of hundreds now being recounted across Rwanda, where an estimated 200,000 people have been slaughtered in an orgy of bloodletting since Habyarimana's death.

But Oreste is adamant the local populations are not to blame.

"They have lived together for years with no problem. It is politicians who exploited the situation, and incited them to kill by sowing fear. Even then, lots of Hutus were not in the Interahamwe," he said.

Oreste, a Tutsi who returned to Rwanda in 1992 after studying in Rome for three years, says he was sure he would die himself.

"I went into my office, locked the door and prayed for those they were killing," he said.

Later, when the looting of the compound began, he hid under his bed.

"One soldier came in and found me,

he told me to give him money and I gave him the money we had put aside for one of our projects. He took it and left telling the others the room was empty," he said.

When night came, the priest slipped off into the bush where he hid for three weeks until the area was captured by the rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front.

"The local people, mainly Hutus, hid me in their houses and gave me food. No one denounced me even when the military came and asked if anyone was hiding in the area. This whole thing is not tribal, but political," he said.

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