

Bisesero survivor: Betrayed by zone turquoise, hunted by killers but still standing

Frank Ntarindwa

The New Times, May 21, 2025



A view of Bisesero Genocide Memorial in Karongi District . Photo by Sam Ngendahimana

Issa Bayiringire Dany could have been one of the more than 60,000 Tutsi massacred in the Bisesero, region of Western Rwanda and ultimately among the over one million Tutsi whose lives were cut short during the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi.

Slashed repeatedly on the head by machete-wielding killers, he survived—barely—not because they showed mercy, but because they thought he was already dead.

Now 38, Bayiringire is the President of Ibuka in Nyamabuye Sector, Muhanga Dis-

trict. He is among the few survivors of the Bisesero resistance, where the Tutsi fought back for days against Interahamwe militias and government troops, refusing to die without a fight.



Ibuka President in Nyamabuye Sector, Issa Bayiringire, a genocide survivor. Photo by Frank Ntarindwa

When the Genocide started, thousands of Tutsi in the larger Bisesero area sought refuge on Muyira hill. That hill bore witness to unspeakable horrors, with blood flowing down its slopes as the Tutsi fought to survive – 31

years ago.

He recalls that life was normal before the Genocide, despite the growing divisionism targeting the Tutsi, an experience shared by Tutsi across Rwanda. April 7 exposed the full extent of the plan to not just kill but eliminate the Tutsi.

In Bisesero specifically, many families who were either based in or had fled to the south-western region, where the controversial French-led Operation Turquoise (Zone Turquoise) was deployed on June 22, 1994, were completely wiped out. National records show that over 15,593 Tutsi families were wiped out.

“When the Genocide started, I was seven years old and in my first term of Primary one. I didn’t know anything about ethnicity at the time. But as a school requirement, I was immediately asked about my ethnic group. Unfortunately, I didn’t know the answer, so they called my older brother, who was in Primary Five, to answer on my behalf. They recorded my ethnicity and warned me never to forget it,” he said.

On April 15, while on holiday, his life changed forever. “Killers flooded Muyira hill. I remember the Tutsi tried to resist, and one evening we gathered to pray. But the killers came, and I hid near a bush. Two men found me. I can’t count how many times they beat me with clubs. They left thinking I was dead.”

That day, he was separated from his family. From then on, he moved from one hideout to another, joining groups of fellow Tutsi trying to evade the killers.

By mid-May, the Rwanda Patriotic Army

(RPA) soldiers had begun taking control of many areas—except for the infamous “Zone Turquoise,” a so-called safe zone created under a French-led military operation launched on June 22, 1994.

There, the killing intensified. Genocide perpetrators were ferried in from Cyangugu, Kibuye, Gikongoro, and Gitarama using ONATRACOM buses. They destroyed crops and shelters to flush out survivors.

“We were running. I got too tired and sat down. My brother slapped me and said, ‘You’re dead if you stay.’ They ran ahead, and I collapsed near a bush where I found another boy. When the killers passed by, they stepped on us. I saw the boy’s head being cut off.”

Bayiringire was also hacked and left for dead. He woke up days later in late May—rescued by French troops who airlifted him to then-Zaire. But his nightmare continued.

“The French almost rejected me, but someone insisted I be taken,” he says. “We went three days without food. Some people complained, and that angered the soldiers. They began asking who was Tutsi and who was Hutu. Eventually, they relocated some evacuees.”

Bayiringire was helped by a French humanitarian whom he calls a “Samaritan,” who treated his wounds and even bought him a cap to hide his scars—one he still wears today.

In late 1994, he was moved to an orphanage in Goma, where he met survivors from HVP Gatagara. But even there, he faced hatred. “The director didn’t want me there. I couldn’t go to school. I just cooked, washed

dishes—did whatever I could to survive.”

In 1996, during efforts to reunite children with families, someone showed him a photo of his father. “I said, ‘That’s my father.’ They told me he was alive and in Rwanda. I agreed to return.”

Back home, he resumed school in Primary Three. “It wasn’t easy living among genocidal priests and teachers. But I endured.” He went on to complete secondary school, build

a business, and start a family.

Now a father and entrepreneur, Bayiringire channels his pain into purpose. Through Ibuka, he counsels trauma survivors and helps preserve the memory of the Genocide.

“When I was in secondary school, I began helping others with trauma. It gave me strength and purpose. I hope my story helps others reject harmful ideologies and stand firm—so this history never repeats.”