

Rwandan Children Search for New Meaning in the Word 'Family'

Mark Fritz

Associated Press, May 24, 1994

"They say 'It's me, I'm alive,'" she said. "But rarely do people come forward."

KIBUNGO, Rwanda (AP) – Dad was drowned in a cattle dip and mom was taken away by a man with a machete. But 14-year-old Donata Nyinshimiye was singing as she walked to get water with her new family.

Twelve kids from different towns and ethnic backgrounds clanged their containers and their voices together as they trooped down main street toward the water pump in the center of this town 70 miles southeast of Kigali.

Singing, they walked to a mass grave sealed over with red soil by a yellow bulldozer - a single left arm reaching out from the ground.

Singing, they walked past the homes of the dead, ransacked by fanatical militias still looking for some reminder of their enemies to destroy.

They were children being chil-

dren, oblivious for the moment to the signs of carnage around them and the ghastly personal losses they each suffered.

The massacres that broke out after President Juvenal Habyarimana died in an unexplained plane crash on April 6 have left few families intact among the minority Tutsis and anti-government Hutus who were targeted for slaughter.

Entire villages and neighborhoods were wiped out in the days that followed, their inhabitants killed with guns and hand grenades or hacked and clubbed to death by extremist Hutu militias bent on avenging the death of their president.

The remnants of tens of thousands of shattered families are frantically trying to reunite, wandering great distances in search of blood links. In some cases children themselves are building desperate little units without parents to watch over

them.

Rose Kayumba, who runs an orphanage in Byumba, said nearly every day small groups of children show up at the gate, without parents or siblings, only each other.

Jennifer Wibabara, a reporter for a radio station run by the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front, puts people on the air who are desperate to find somebody from the family.

"They say 'It's me, I'm alive,'" she said. "But rarely do people come forward."

In Gahini, about 45 miles northeast of Kigali, the Bwakeyebute family now only consists of father Benoit and 6-year-old son David. Bwakeyebute watched as militias cut the throat of his wife four weeks ago. He tried to flee, but the killers hacked at his face and arms and then left him for dead.

"An old woman with a goat found me," said Bwakeyebute, his right arm in a cast and his left arm and face tattooed with wounds.

His son, spared by the killers, was standing nearby when he regained consciousness.

The 12 young people walking in a tight little knot down the main street of Kibungo ranged in age from 5-year-old Francine Mahoro, a wide-eyed waif in dirty white dress, to 17-year-old Cesare Nyirabashumba, a rail-thin woman who stood more than 6 feet tall.

"I'm the leader," Nyirabashumba, a Tutsi, said of her charges, who were both Hutu and Tutsi.

Some came from this town, where survivors say at least 1,000 people were massacred in the local Roman Catholic Church on April 17, loaded into trucks and buried in a pit atop one of the green hills nestling the city.

Others walked from as far away as Rusumo and Sake, towns near the Burundi border 50 miles away, to escape the militias.

All came together at a nearby hospital that was turned into a refugee camp. Asked how many had lost one or both parents, eight of the 12 raised their hands.

Donata Nyinshimiye was from Rusumo, where she had the living nightmare of watching men grab her cattle herder father, drag him into the deep trench of chemicals used to cure cattle of parasites, and hold him under until the bubbles stopped.

"I'm alone," she said.

Prosper Rudasingwa, 10, who comes from Kibungo, said he's the only male member of his family left alive. His three brothers and father were killed, and his mother is missing. He was with his two little sisters.

Kibungo, a modern-looking town of neat brick buildings, a post office and large electrical power plant that supplied power nationwide, was seized by rebels of the Rwandan Patriotic Front on April 20.

The Tutsi-dominated rebels have been battling the Hutu-led government they blame for inflicting the carnage across this nation the size of Maryland. Aid agencies say most of the massacres were carried out by the Interahamwe, the government-backed civilian militias that attacked in nearly every village.

The children said they have a deep fear of the Interahamwe. During their mile-long walk for water, a group of men they believed were mi-

litia members shouted obscenities at them.

"We're always worried they will finish us off," said Nyirabashumba, wearing a baseball cap with a BMW logo.

The raggedy youngsters then walked on down the road to fill their odd assortment of plastic containers. Trudging along, they started singing again.

©1994, The Associated Press