

Envoy urges UN to help fight Genocide denial

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Ambassador Gasana. (Net photo)

At a time when Genocide survivors' wounds are still fresh with many continuing to search for the remains of their loved ones, there is need for the international community to partner with Rwanda on its healing journey, the country's top diplomat at the United Nations has said.

Amb. Eugène-Richard Gasana, the Minister of State for Cooperation and Permanent Representative to the United Nations, was on Monday addressing the UN General Assembly on the occasion of the 22nd commemoration of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, at the UN headquarters in New York.

He said, 22 years after suffering a genocide that claimed the lives of more than a million of its citizens, Rwanda needs the support of the international community as it continues on "the long and treacherous road of mending the hearts of those broken".

Gasana said the memory of those who lost their lives in the 100-day tragedy continues to be undermined by some elements that indulge in Genocide denial, those who drive people to deny, trivialise, and

even distort the figures of the victims.

"The latter continues to play out to this day, when 800,000 victims are cited, instead of one million. Another tactic used is to deflect attention and for perpetrators to rebrand themselves as heroes and not villains," the envoy said.

He castigated those who claim that what happened in 1994 in Rwanda was not a genocide but war.

"This attempt as we saw it after the Holocaust seeks to nullify, downplay and revise the perpetrators' role," he said.

'Its Genocide against Tutsi, not Rwandan Genocide'

Amb. Gasana added: "There is also the proliferation of writings aimed at denying or trivialising the Genocide, claiming freedom of speech but in reality, these are sheer expressions of hatred that attempt to incite people to overthrow the Rwandan Government and commit a second genocide."

He observed that with the advent of social media, Genocide deniers have obtained another weapon, which allows anyone to pose as an expert in well-orchestrated campaigns of disinformation.

"You all know that it's a tendency in today's modern world that people will tend to believe those who shout loudest and this often includes the most poorly informed and, more dangerously, those with a political agenda that underplays what they know to be false," he told the UN.

Amb. Gasana said he is baffled that anyone can deny the numerous horrific stories of Rwandans.

The diplomat also asked the UN to call the Genocide what it is: "Genocide against the Tutsi", instead of such terminologies as "Rwandan Genocide" or the "Genocide in Rwanda".

He said incorrect references to the Genocide against the Tutsi have become a breeding ground for Genocide deniers who often argue that even the UN didn't recognise any genocide against the Tutsi.

The UN session also heard two moving accounts of humanity and resilience from two young women, including Nelly Mukayazire, daughter of a Genocide perpetrator.

Mukayazire's story

Mukayazire, whose mother is serving a life sentence in a Kigali prison for her role during the Genocide, said despite being a child of a Genocide perpetrator, she is 'a living testimony of the new Rwanda.'

In a complex post-Genocide environment, Mukayazire said, Rwandans have built an upright nation, where the child of a Genocide perpetrator and the child of a Genocide survivor, have equal access to education, health care, jobs and leadership positions.

"However, as much as the country's politics sets the tone, the journey of healing and reconciliation requires a lot of every individual," she said.

"My two siblings and I lived with my father. During the whole period of Genocide, we had no idea where our mother was. My father knew but did not tell us because we were too young to understand and at our early age we thought our mother was dead," recounted Mukayazire, who was 12 years old when the Genocide happened.

The first time she heard about her mother – since the Genocide – was in 1996.

She was in Senior Two when a fellow student showed her a newspaper article with a picture of her mother, her name and the names of their relatives under the headline: Famous Interahamwe captured.

Interahamwe was the name for the militia that executed the Genocide.

"It was the worst day of my life. One day I was a survivor, a child of a Tutsi father who had lost his parents and relatives in the Genocide, and instantly I became a child of a Genocide perpetrator!"

"I went through a series of difficult phases: First came denial. I simply refused to believe it. I decided

that my mother was dead. But society wouldn't let me forget."

As a result she lost most of her friends who were Genocide survivors, she said. "To them I was a liar and a traitor. I faced rejection from all sides and lost identity. Next came facing the reality and acceptance. I eventually realised that I could not run from reality forever. Everywhere I went; my mother's reputation preceded me."

In the end, she decided to face the truth and started meeting her mother.

It was tough and heart-breaking, she said.

"I wanted to know the truth about what happened. At the same time, it was too much for me. There are things you never wish to hear from a parent, a mother."

Mukayazire said it was only through the Gacaca courts that she could find the truth.

The semi-traditional justice system facilitated healing for many, she said.

"Gacaca helped me get the truth that I desperately needed, to be able to reopen my heart to my mother. There is no way to repair what she had done, and I will never understand the reasons behind her actions."

She said for all these years she has never been prevented from seeing her mother.

Speaking about the country's emphasis on meritocracy as opposed to any other consideration in the labour market, she shared her own experience. Mukayazire said she competed for positions in public service and was evaluated based on merit.

"I worked for the Prime Minister and, today, I am Deputy Chief of Staff of a great statesman, President Paul Kagame. This can only happen in a country that is committed to human rights without any discrimination."

Mukayazire told members of the UN General Assembly that they have been and will be told diverting stories by those who find them at the UN headquarters or in their respective countries looking for protecting their own interests.

"But that is not the reality about Rwanda, the reality we live on daily basis is this one, of an inclusive country, people with common identity, united for a life, a vision, a destiny," she said.

“As we work to transform Rwanda, we are fully aware that the struggle against genocide ideology is a continuous one, one that requires regional and international partnership.”
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