

France extended military support to Habyarimana's regime despite rights abuse

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A French marines detachment in Rwanda in 1994. / Photo : Net.

Shortly after the RPF launched a military attack on October 1, 1990, the international press reported that the Rwandan government was sponsoring massacres of civilians.

These revelations are contained in the Muse Report, which was released on Monday April 19, 2021.

According to excerpts of the report, on October 10, 1990, Reuters reported that approximately 400 Rwandan civilians fled to Uganda after Rwandan

troops and anti-Tutsi militias attacked peasants accused of supporting the RPF outside Nyagatare in the Mutara region near the border with Uganda.

Citing villagers, the report says ; “Soldiers shot peasants and burned down huts while Hutus hacked women and children with machetes in attacks on at least nine settlements inhabited mainly by the minority Tutsi tribe in northeast Rwanda.”



A group of Interahamwe militiamen carry model rifles during a training under the supervision of a French soldier in 1994.

One witness recounted the kind of scene that would become all too familiar four years later. “One woman died after Hutus hacked off her arms and forced them into her mouth.... Her two small children, aged one and five were then slaughtered.”

Another witness said, “The whole place was littered with bodies, it seems more people died than escaped.”

The fleeing villagers said that hundreds of villagers had been killed. Around the same time, other massacres took place around Nyagatare. As one surviving farmer said, “They began shooting our cattle, then they ordered us outside. We thought we were going to be released, but they formed us

in a line and then began shooting people.”

The farmer “displayed festering gunshot wounds on his leg and back,” Reuters reported at the time. “He said he had fallen behind a bush where he remained for three days, too scared to move.”



Photos of victims of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi hang inside the Kigali Genocide Memorial. Photo : File.

The violence was not limited to the northeastern border region. On the other side of the country, in and around Kibilira, roughly 175 miles southwest of where the RPF troops had attacked, local authorities directed the massacre of more than 300 mostly Tutsi civilians, and the burning of more than 400 mostly Tutsi homes. Kigali issued feeble denials.

Rwandan Foreign Minister Casimir Bizimungu said the murdered civilians were actually rebels in civilian clothing “because ‘that’s their guerrilla tactics.’”

A public report issued in March 1993 by an independent consortium of human rights groups led by the Paris-based Federation Internationale des

Droits de L'Homme (International Federation of Human Rights) ("FIDH"), would set the historical record straight.

According to [a FAR] officer...and verified by testimony of displaced persons in camps in the region of Ngarama and others who had fled to Kigali, several companies of the Rwandan army were ordered to clear the zone between Nyagatare and Kagitumba [both in the northeast] of all humans and animals. The massacre was carried out on October 8, 1990 by helicopters and soldiers on the ground. . . .Between 500 and 1,000 persons were killed. The Rwandan Red Cross buried the dead.

The FIDH also concluded that beginning on 10 October, local Rwandan officials led massacres in Kibilira and Satinsyi in western Rwanda, killing over 300 (mainly Tutsi), burning over 400 homes, and destroying and pillaging "nearly all the farm animals, food reserves and household furnishings" in 48 hours, confirming the broad outlines of the contemporaneous Reuters report.

French officials knew about the violence, and, what is more, they knew that President Habyarimana's party, the MRND, had, in some cases at least, played a role in it. A 13 October 1990 cable by Col. Galinié reported : "Organized by the MRND, Hutu farmers have intensified their search for suspicious Tutsis in the foothills ; massacres are reported in the region of Kibilira, 20 kilometers northwest of Gitarama. As previously indicated, the risk that this conflict will spread seems to be becoming a reality."

Ambassador Martres was equally aware of the massacres and mass arrests. Martres, who had been on vacation when the war began, returning to Kigali on 5 October, was on good terms with Habyarimana and was a regular lunch guest at the president's home. The two men were close enough, in fact, that members of the diplomatic corps liked to joke that Martres acted less like France's ambassador to Rwanda than like Habyarimana's ambassador to France.

"Without questioning the diplomatic talents of my colleague," Belgian Ambassador Johan Swinnen would later say, "I found it somewhat shameful, a bit humiliating and even dangerous for Martres to be the object of the perception that he was a tool of the other country."

On 7 October, Martres told Reuters that the situation outside the capital was very confused, and conceded that "there had been what he termed slip-ups because the troops were nervous. 'Of course, we fear it could get worse and turn into an ethnic disaster,' [Martres] said."

By 15 October 1990, Martres acknowledged that the Tutsi population in Rwanda feared a genocide.

“[The Tutsi population] is still counting on a military victory,” Martres wrote in a memo titled “analysis of the situation by the Tutsi population.” “A military victory,” he continued, “even a partial one, would allow them to escape genocide.”

Martres did not dismiss the possibility of genocide. Indeed, he would later tell the French Parliamentary Information Mission (MIP) that as early as October 1990, it was possible to see the calamity ahead : The genocide was foreseeable as early as then [October 1990], even if we couldn’t imagine its magnitude and atrociousness.

Some Hutus had in fact had the audacity to refer to it. Colonel Laurent Serubuga, Deputy Chief of Staff of the Rwandan army, was pleased with the RPF attack, which would serve to justify the massacre of Tutsis.

The massacres took place in rural areas, where they were harder to see for the media and the international community. In Kigali itself, late in the night of 4 October, the Rwandan government staged a fake attack, supposedly by RPF troops, on the capital, and used it as a pretext to arrest “several thousand people as suspected rebels or sympathizers;” many were tortured.

While most were Tutsi or Habyarimana’s political opponents, the regime’s indiscriminate sweep even took in Ambassador Martres’ driver Jean Rwabahizi, who had worked at the embassy for more than two decades. Rwabahizi was arrested ostensibly for being out after curfew. He said he was first taken to Kanombe Military Camp and beaten so severely that when the responsible officers transferred him to Nyamirambo stadium with numerous other arrestees, the authorities there did not want to accept Rwabahizi because they did not take “corpses.”

Ambassador Martres’ wife was ultimately able to get him released. To this day, Rwabahizi does not know how she learned of his arrest. According to Rwabahizi, he told Ambassador Martres what happened to him and also about the plight of the abuse of others who were held at Nyamirambo stadium. It took Rwabahizi two months to recover from his injuries and return to driving Ambassador Martres.

The mass arrests made news in Europe. On 9 October 1990, *Le Monde* reported that the Rwandan government’s “hunt for arms and rebels in the working-class Nyamirambo neighborhood is reportedly brutal. In the stadium next door, the army has rounded up several hundred ‘suspects.’”

Within days, *Le Monde* revised its estimate of the number arrested from “a few hundred” to 3,000, as did publications in the United States. A 12 October cable signed by Col. Galinié and sent by Ambassador Martres put

the number at 10,000, noting also that “the interrogations are violent,” and “people are held for several days without food or drink.”

On 8 October, Belgian Foreign Minister Mark Eyskens spoke to Rwandan Ambassador to Belgium Francois Ngarukiyintwali about the arrests. On 10 October, the Quai d’Orsay issued a statement declaring its hope that the Rwandan government would avoid “excess” and called on local authorities to “engage in dialogue.”

Belgium’s ambassador to Rwanda, Johan Swinnen, was far more forceful, personally urging President Juvénal Habyarimana “to respect the rights of people detained in an anti-rebel mopping up operation.”

A formal demarche from Swinnen to the Habyarimana government on 11 October laid out the full range of Belgium’s concerns, decrying the reported massacres, other human rights abuses, and Rwanda’s denial of Red Cross access to detainees.

Habyarimana eventually released many of the detainees, and Martres would later claim credit by attributing the decision to apply “international pressure, mainly that of France because of its significant military presence. Therefore, it was with the sole purpose of avoiding the worst outbursts of violence that French military presence was maintained [in Rwanda].”

Lost in Martres’ attempt to assign credit to the French government for Habyarimana’s concessions was the hard truth that France was backing the Rwandan government despite French officials’ knowledge of the Habyarimana’s regime’s “worst excesses.”

The warnings would only grow louder. A 19 October 1990 cable by Col. Galinié cautioned that “hardliners of the current regime” might encourage Rwandans to commit more “serious abuses against the inland Tutsi populations” if the RPF succeeded in seizing more territory.

Galinié assessed that Rwanda’s Hutu majority was primed to fear that an RPF military victory would mark a return to Tutsi rule. Rwandans, he argued in a 24 October note, would never accept the reestablishment in northeast Rwanda of what he called “the despised regime of the first Tutsi kingdom.”

His prediction—chilling, in light of what was to come—was that “this overt or covert reestablishment would lead : in all likelihood, to the physical elimination of the Tutsi within the country, 500,000 to 700,000 people, by the Hutu, 7,000,000 individuals.”

This is an excerpt from the Muse Report.