

Paris: Genocide survivor recalls ETO Kicukiro ordeal

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Jeanne Uwimbabazi, a genocide survivor, shares her testimony during the inauguration of the memorial in Paris. She was 16 years old when the Genocide against the Tutsi began on April 7, 1994. Courtesy

Jeanne Uwimbabazi was 16 years old when the Genocide against the Tutsi began on April 7, 1994. She lived with her family in Kigali. During the Easter holidays, they had been preparing for the baptism of her 11-month-old niece, Ornella, scheduled for April 10.

Their lives changed forever on the evening of April 6, when the plane carrying President Juvénal Habyarimana was shot down in Kigali. By morning, violence had erupted across the country.

“Very early on April 7, my father asked us to leave our home because it had become too dangerous,” Uwimbabazi recalled as she spoke on Tuesday, June 2, at the inauguration of France’s first permanent memorial dedicated to the victims of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi.



Jeanne Uwimbabazi was 16 years old when the Genocide against the Tutsi began on April 7, 1994.

Hours later, her father was killed by soldiers of the former Rwandan army. As violence engulfed the capital city, Uwimbabazi’s family became dispersed, trying to find safety.

Hoping that a United Nations-protected

site offered the best chance of survival, Uwimbabazi eventually reached the ETO Kicukiro school, where thousands of civilians had gathered under the protection of UN peacekeepers.

For days, the displaced believed they were safe. However, on April 11, foreign nationals were evacuated, the UN troops withdrew, leaving approximately 2,000 Rwandans behind in the hands of machete-wielding Interahamwe militia.

“We watched the last Western civilians leave under military escort,” she said. “Then the peacekeepers told us they would remain. Shortly afterward, they too departed. They abandoned us.”



First Lady Jeannette Kagame, President Kagame, and his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron listen to Jeanne Uwimbabazi’s testimony at the event.

She described the panic that followed as desperate civilians tried to stop the departing UN military vehicles.

“Their mere presence would have been enough to protect us,” she said.

Soon after the withdrawal, militias and

soldiers entered the area. Refugees were rounded up and marched to Nyanza in Kicukiro, where mass killings would take place.

“My whole world shattered in that place,” Uwimbabazi said.

She lost her mother Angéline, her sister Marie-Josée, uncles, cousins, neighbours, childhood friends, and countless others.

“It is a long list,” she said. “Only a few people survived.”

After surviving the massacre, she spent several days hiding in nearby bushes before being discovered by attackers who left her in wounds.



(L-R) Rwanda’s ambassador to France François Nkulikiyimfura, State Minister for Sports Rwego Ngarambe, State Minister for Youth Sandrine Umutoni and Justice Minister Emmanuel Ugirashebuja during the event.

RPA soldiers later rescued her and other survivors and transported them to safety. She particularly remembered a soldier who remained with her and comforted her when she had nearly lost all hope.

“During our journey through darkness,

they represented humanity,” she said. “They rescued us from annihilation.”

Following treatment in Rwanda, Uwimbabazi was evacuated to France, where she was welcomed by a host family that helped her rebuild her life.

Uwimbabazi recalled arriving at Orly Airport in France on June 5, 1994, alongside 31 other seriously injured children who had been evacuated for medical treatment.

“Everything felt surreal,” she said. “We had just survived the ultimate crime, the genocide perpetrated against the Tutsi. Bearing witness became almost a final act of resistance against the forgetfulness and erasure to which we were destined.”



Louise Mushikiwabo, the Secretary-General of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie (OIF), also attended the inauguration of the first permanent memorial for the victims of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in France on Tuesday, June 2. Courtesy

In the years that followed, she became committed to sharing her testimony, particularly in France, where she said survivors often en-

countered denial and distortion of the genocide that claimed over one million lives.

Reflecting on the newly inaugurated memorial in Paris, Uwimbabazi described it as an important act of remembrance and symbolic reparation.

“It permanently restores the presence of those who disappeared in the public sphere,” she said. “It is a work of education, transmission, and reflection for future generations.”



Mourners listen to Uwimbabazi's testimony at the inauguration of the first permanent memorial for the victims of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in France on Tuesday, June 2. Courtesy

She commended French authorities for supporting the project to erect the Genocide memorial. She also stressed the importance of justice for survivors and victims' families.

While welcoming the prosecution of genocide suspects in France, she argued that justice must remain accessible to those most affected, emphasizing the need for extradition to Rwanda.

“It is essential that survivors and families of the victims be able to attend the trials of

those accused of genocide,” she said. “Justice victims confront one another.”
is also a space where facts, perpetrators, and