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BYLINE: RAYMOND BONNER; New York Times

DATELINE: KIBUYE, Rwanda

BODY:

KIBUYE, Rwanda -- Inside the Roman Catholic church, a stone edifice with a rectangular bell tower high on a promontory jutting into Lake Kivu, several thousand Tutsi men, women and children sought sanctuary last April when killing started in their villages.

But a mob of several hundred Hutu men, some in uniforms with rifles but most in civilian clothes with clubs and machetes, had no respect for the church or for life.

The killing began about 10 a.m.; by early afternoon, blood and bodies filled the cement-floor of the church, the small side chapels, even the confessional booths. Then the killers went off to drink beer.

The next day, the mob moved on to the soccer stadium, less than a mile away in this small, grubby town with only one dirt road running through it. More than 7,000 Tutsi were gathered there. The soldiers fired rifle grenades into the crowd, then the militia swarmed over it, hacking and beating people to death.

The slaughter started late in the afternoon, and some people were still alive at nightfall. So the next morning, the mob returned to finish the job.

The violence in Kibuye was neither random nor spontaneous, and the United Nations has opened a sweeping investigation into massacres like these in the hope of trying the main culprits for what it calls acts of genocide in Rwanda.

Trials by international tribunals could yield some detailed answers on how the killings were orchestrated. But for now the outside world is struggling for an answer to the more troubling question of why so many people in Rwandan towns took part -- or stood by passively -- when friends, neighbors and children were butchered.

In Kibuye, some of the survivors are pondering the same issue. The massacres here were "'the last step" in eliminating the Tutsi in the province of Kibuye, Augustin Karara, the mayor of this provincial capital, said.

He said that the mob had tried to force him to join the rampage, but that he had refused. Perhaps by virtue of his position, the mayor was not killed.

Other men joined against their will, to save their own lives.

Join roving mobs or die

Evode Micomyiza, a 33-year-old civics teacher, said he stood on the hill at the east end of the soccer stadium that day with a club in his hand as other men chopped and clubbed defenseless men, women and children.

Micomyiza said that he did not kill anyone and that he had gone along only because a gang heading to the stadium had said that if he did not join them it was proof that he was a supporter of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, the Tutsi-led rebel army.

""We were forced to move with the killers in order not to be killed," he said.

""Everyone had to participate," said Bernard Ndutiye, a Lutheran minister here. ""To prove that you weren't RPF, you had to walk around with a club. Being a pastor was not an excuse. They said you can have religion afterward. "

Ndutiye said every morning for days before the massacres, mobs roamed the town beating on drums and blowing whistles, calling men out of their houses to join them.

One day, a gang came to Ndutiye's house and found he was protecting three Tutsi children -- his children's playmates. The gang clubbed one of the Tutsi boys to death in front of Ndutiye.

After that, Ndutiye said he agreed to take up a machete, but he said he never killed anyone and found that if he feigned sickness the gangs would leave him alone.

Massacre reasons cited

At the moment a few things seem clear. It was not random violence that engulfed this country. ""Five hundred thousand people aren't killed by a bunch of guys with machetes," says Lt. Col.

Erik de Stabenrath, a French military officer who has investigated the massacres.

Land is often cited as the root cause of the killings -- that Hutu and Tutsi killed each other to keep the land they had or to take over the land of others. While this is one of the world's most densely populated countries, and rural peasants make up the bulk of the population, that explanation is not complete.

Others point to long-simmering resentment between the Hutu majority and the Tutsi minority. But ethnic differences between the two are slight -- they speak the same language and have intermarried for so many generations that many Rwandans do not know if another person is a Hutu or a Tutsi.

Another explanation is that the violence arose out of a struggle for political power.

During centuries of feudalism, the Tutsi ruled, even though they made up only about 15 percent of the population. The Belgians perpetuated Tutsi dominance. In 1959 the Hutu started to rise, and by the time of independence in 1962 they were on top. They killed thousands of Tutsi and forced tens of thousands into exile.

In 1990 a group of exiled Tutsi in Uganda launched a civil war under the banner of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, and the Hutu began to worry about losing power. Under pressure from Western governments, Rwanda, which had been a one-party state since independence, allowed other parties to form.

The parties created organizations for young people. The ruling Hutu party, the National Republican Movement for Democracy and Development, called its youth wing the Interahamwe (pronounced inter-a-hahm-way), which means "those who attack together." Interahamwe has since entered the Rwandan lexicon as a word used loosely and interchangeably with "militia."

The Rwandan Army provided the Interahamwe with the arms and training that turned it into a military organization. As the rebel Patriotic Front advanced, the militia focused on Tutsi as targets.

Soon every Tutsi was seen as a rebel supporter, as were moderate Hutu.

With support from elements of the army, the militia launched what was tantamount to the final solution in April after President Juvenal Habyarimana, a Hutu, died in a mysterious plane crash.

Within hours, the killings started.

Militia recruits peasants

The militiamen who came to Kibuye were from other parts of the country, Micomyiza and other residents said, a pattern that has been reported throughout the country. Then, the militia recruited peasants.

The message was a simple one -- all Tutsi were supporters of the Patriotic Front and if the Front won the war, all Hutu would be killed.

Micomyiza got dragged into the butchery.

"It was just a way of protecting myself," he said.

But why had he even passively taken part?

"I come back to the question of freedom and liberty,"
Micomyiza said. "If I had been free I wouldn't have picked up that
club. "

GRAPHIC: Photo: Rwandan children scramble for loose beans at a food distribution
center Saturday at a refugee camp near Goma, Zaire; Associated Press