

French rescuers confront Rwanda horrors Injured Tutsi stagger from forest hideouts

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From Sam Kiley in Bisesero, Western Rwanda

A WEEK after starting their rescue mission in Rwanda, French special forces commandos finally discovered about 250 Tutsi people yesterday, many of them badly wounded, hiding in forests and plantations near the lake-side town of Kibuye.

As news of the arrival of the French spread through the isolated pockets of Tutsi scattered across the hills they rushed towards the four French Jeeps : the wounded hobbling on crutches or supported by spears, while those who were malnourished made wobbly efforts to run. One member of the French gendarmerie counter-terrorist unit was moved to tears by the sight, and by what he had seen a few minutes before. Four hundred yards from where the French soldiers were handing out biscuits, they were confronted with the reason for their work in Rwanda. Un-

der almost every tree lay a decomposing body. Decapitated children and women with shattered skulls competed for space with vivid wild flowers.

From a population of 3,000 people in the Bisesero area, just south of Kibuye, there remained only 600 Tutsis, Aphrodise Mutatumura said. All the others had been killed since Rwanda's genocide began. Only three women lived through the massacres, and the remaining menfolk were being picked off by Hutu militia daily.

The day had not started well for the French. Their first visit was to the hamlet of Gisovu, where their commander naively believed a tall man who claimed to be a Tutsi and said he was living in harmony with his Hutu neighbours – a statement that is unbelievable in Rwanda. The French flew in food for the villagers, only to find them staggering in from their fields under the weight of the beans and sorghum they were harvesting.

Then Tutsi survivors described how they were attacked by a group from Gisovu. “We have just been giving a buffet to a bunch of murderers,” said one of the gendarme, swearing.

In the area where Tutsis, who once made up 15 per cent of Rwanda’s 7.5 million people, had lived in some concentration, perhaps 300 houses had been destroyed. Small groups have been camping huddled 30 to a room in the ruins. Others took to the forests. But the militia and the army simply burnt them out by setting fire to the grass around the trees – the black scars of what the Tutsis themselves call “Tutsi hunting” were in evidence all around.

The tough French soldiers were clearly unprepared for the scale of the slaughter they saw. No amount of television coverage can compare to the overpowering reality. But what staggered them was the capacity for people to survive. One man showed them a bullet wound through his

hand which has swollen to twice its normal size. A pretty young girl of about ten chewed on her biscuits, smiled at a soldier, then walked away revealing a four-inch gash through her skull and the septic brain beneath. “God, no death is OK, but to be killed like this, or to look like the living dead is unbelievable,” said the soldier.

Soon afterwards a white pick-up full of Rwandan government soldiers, who have been as enthusiastic about killing their countrymen as the civilian militia, drew up. A captain asked the occupants where they were from. They claimed to have come from Butare, hundred of miles to the south. But as the car drove by, the Tutsi refugees backed off as if they had been electrocuted.

They knew the car, and they knew their killers. “That car comes here every day filled with *Interahamwe* [those who killed together] and they try to kill us” said Celestin, 18.