

Massacre of Tutsi at Ruhanga Anglican Church, a survivor's story

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Mourners at Ruhanga Genocide Memorial site, the former Anglican Church in Rusororo sector in Gasabo district. File

In 1994, many Tutsi lived in Ruhanga and other surrounding hills in the former Gikoro commune. When the Genocide against the Tutsi started, they took their spears, bows and arrows and fled – with everything they had including hundreds of cows – to Ruhanga hill.

They thought they would camp there for a short while until a sense of normalcy returned and they went back to their home areas and continued with their normal lives. But it was never to be.

When Interahamwe militia started attacking them, they took children, women and older people inside the church and then fought back using their traditional weapons, and anything else they could grab on, including stones.

After Interahamwe realized that the Tutsi resisted the killing, they called for support from the gendarmerie in Rwamagana. A military helicopter came to bombard the Tutsi positions. The survivors were hacked to death with machetes by Interahamwe. After that, killers went to the church and used petrol to burn everyone who remained there. Very few survived.

Among the victims, there was also a pastor Sosthène Renzaho – and his family members – who opposed the killing of Tutsi and decided to stay with them and died there. The church was later on transformed into a genocide memorial.

One of the survivors of the Ruhanga massacres, Eric Mwizerwa, a resident of Rusororo sector in Gasabo district, shared his testimony, on April 7, as the nation started commemorating for the 29th time.

Mwizerwa recalled that in 1992, his elder brother and an uncle joined the RPF-Inkotanyi rebel army, the RPA. Having been born and raised in Gikoro territory in the region controlled by Paul Bisengimana, the bourgoumestre of Gikoro Commune, they were well aware of the leaders' plans to commit genocide long before 1994. Laurent Semanza, the Bourgmestre of Bicumbi Commune, also oppressed the Tutsi.

In the morning of April 7, 1994, Mwizerwa and his family woke up to news of the downing of the plane carrying president Juvenal Habyarimana.

A neighbour called Gatikiri, came to their house wielding "a club with nails" – Interahamwe called it Nta mpongano y'Umwanzi ('No atonement for the enemy') – warning them that they would not survive the night because of their ethnicity. Fearing for their lives, Mwizerwa's family joined more than 2,000 others who sought safe haven in a nearby primary school. That night, Interahamwe militiamen arrived at the school with a list of names of people to be killed, and threatened to kill anyone who stood in their way.

The following day, elderly Tutsi suggested that they flee to Ruhanga, "where there was a church." Back then, it was a common belief that the church was a safe place. Very many people camped at the church. With young men protecting them, Mwizerwa and others stayed there for three days without any trouble.

It was a ploy to disarm us and kill us without difficulty

On April 12, 1994, however, Mwizerwa recalls, four gendarmes arrived, parked their vehicles and summoned the Tutsi elders.

"They asked our elders to persuade the young men and everyone else among us who had traditional weapons to hand them over so that they could call in gendarmeries to protect us. It was a ploy to disarm us and then kill us without difficulty.

"The old men rejected the offer and in fact ran away. Then one of the soldiers turned around to fire at the old men but instead shot his colleague in the leg. They put their injured colleague in the car and took off. But that day turned out to be the spark of us being attacked by the military because they reported that they had been shot at by Inyenzi (Tutsi rebels) from CND who had come to protect us."

The Conseil National pour le Développement, or CND, is the present-day Parliamentary Buildings at Kimihurura, in Kigali. It is now home to the Campaign Against Genocide Museum which tells the extraordinary story of RPA's operations against the ex-FAR (Forces Armées Rwandaises) and its rescue efforts shortly after the genocidal machine was set in motion.

Inyenzi (cockroaches) is how the genocidal government termed the Tutsi and the RPF/A-Inkotanyi rebels.

The genocidal regime's soldiers then mobilised hundreds of Interahamwe from the

Communes of Rubungo, Gikoro, Gikomero, and Bicumbi for a massive assault on the Tutsi at the Ruhanga compound, on April 14.

From early morning till dark, the Tutsi fought back ferociously and repelled the killers.

Mwizerwa thinks their attackers feared forcing their way in the compound because, even if it was not true, Interahamwe believed that well-armed RPA rebel forces were among the Tutsi in there.

“They went back and reported that Ruhanga could not be attacked successfully because it was guarded by Inyenzi from CND.”

April 15, 1994 was a turning point for the fate of the more than 15,000 Tutsi in the compound.

“On the morning of April 15, we woke up to realise that we were surrounded by soldiers and Interahamwe from all the four Communes.”

The Tutsi prepared for battle as usual; throwing stones at the assailants. But suddenly a helicopter hovered above them spitting fire. When it left, the militaries on the ground also fired.

The Tutsi hid, locking themselves inside the church and classrooms.

It was at this point that Interahamwe told pastor Renzaho to help them open the padlocked gates and doors. He refused and they killed him along with his wife, and set their house on fire. Then they broke into the compound, and created a scene of carnage.

But that was not the end.

Not sure they had murdered everyone in

the compound, the killers played a trick. After a while, some of the murderers went back inside, pretending to be a party of rescuers. They shouted, asking whoever was still alive and could hear them, to stand up since the killers had left.

There was a man who was an expert in killing babies

Many Tutsi were still alive – many badly wounded – lying among the bodies. Unfortunately, they took the bait, and started calling for help. Those who could stand were then forced to arrange their own people’s dead bodies in heaps so that the Interahamwe could double check if any others were still breathing.

“There was a man who was an expert in killing babies. Whenever they saw a baby, they would request for him to come and kill it. That was his speciality.

“After gathering the corpses, they ordered us to form two queues. Whoever had money would go to the queue of those to be shot. People without money would go to the second queue to be killed using machetes.”

Mwizerwa was terrified. While he was thinking of running away so that he could, at least, be shot and killed while running, he noticed a woman carrying a baby on her back, in the queue of people with money. Instinctively, he hurried, and stood in front of her. When the killers inquired whether he had money, he blurted, “I don’t, but my mother has money.”

The woman then paid them and they shot and killed her. Seeing her collapse was a traumatic emotional blow. Mwizerwa blacked out.

The killers later poured petrol on the piles of dead bodies and set them on fire.

In the afternoon, when he came to, Mwizerwa initially tried to move his body but he could not because of the heavy bodies on top of him. After he eventually managed to separate himself from the corpses, he moved to the classrooms and found other survivors trying to check for others still alive in the corpses.

Only 43 people had survived that day.

Seventeen of them, including Mwizerwa and his five-year-old sister, headed to CND. Before they got there, they were attacked by Interahamwe. Ten others were hacked to death.

The seven others wouldn't survive longer as well since danger lurked in all places.

Soon afterwards, he was alone again.

"Sadly, I was again captured by the Interahamwe and beaten severely."

Among other horrors, he watched as, first, his elder brother, and later, his mother, were hacked to death, on separate occasions.

When the Interahamwe that seized him accompanied him to the area where others were being killed, he had found his mother there as well. They separated as she wandered in search of a safe place for her younger children. She pleaded to be permitted to pray before she was executed. A woman among the militiamen wanted to have his mother's kitenge dress because even though it was dirty it was still new. She took it.

"I did not cry while watching my mother's death."

And that's how his captor decided to let him go; so that he "could eventually be killed by others."

"For a week, I hid in an abandoned home, and finally, my wounds healed without any medical help."

A few days later, Mwizerwa recalled, he found his former Sunday school teacher who agreed to escort him, at night, to the area where RPA soldiers were camped.

"He informed me that the Inyenzi had arrived and were in the vicinity, promising to take me as near as he could. Around 3 am, he brought me close to the Inyenzi camp. That was the farthest he could take me."