

Kwibuka25: How Muslims of Mabare fought off Interahamwe

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Mufti Hitimana, hands a certificate to Bagabo, who led the resistance against Genocide perpetrators in Mabare. Courtesy

Rwanda Muslims Community (RMC) recently honoured victims of Genocide against the Tutsi, and Muslims who fought for days to protect hundreds of Tutsis who had fled to a mosque in Mabare Cell, Rubona Sector in Rwamagana District.

It began on April 10, 1994, when the massacres started on the other side of Lake Mugesera, in Kagashi.

Mabare Muslims took their canoes and rescued eight Tutsis who had been thrown into the water to drown.

More people began to seek refuge at the mosque, recalled Imam Rashid Bagabo, who was the leader of the mosque and the organiser of the resistance that also featured his deputy, who ended up being killed by the same militiamen.

The resistance alarmed the perpetrators, who then started attacking them from April 13. The Muslims established two roadblocks to protect the refugees inside the mosque who had just increased to around 500

people.

According to Bagabo, those who manned the roadblocks included non-Muslims.

“In Mabare, we had two opportunities; first was the conviction by the Muslims that none of the people from here would be killed over ethnicity or any other unjust thing like that,” he said.

The second aspect, he added, was the leader of Rubona Sector, who was under immense pressure from the communal leader but was reluctant to support violence against the Tutsi as he had been ordered.

Women and children collected stones for men, which were added to their arrows and spears to repulse attacks, he said.

The militiamen eventually got back-up of killers from elsewhere and more equipment from the national army of the time (Ex-FAR).

They shot at them at the roadblocks until all the Muslims and refugees returned to the mosque.

Two unexpected attacks later killed nearly everyone who had chosen to stay in the mosque, except Bagabo and a few Tutsi who had opted to hide in a nearby dense papyrus shrub on the banks of the lake.

Some survivors of the attacks left the mosque and went to other places, and Bagabo never saw them again, except Alphonsine Musabwamana, one of the eight they had saved with canoes a few days earlier.

Learning that RPF Inkotanyi liberators were already in Rwamagana town, Bagabo showed people in the swamp how they could successfully move to where the rescuers were.

“Of the six people we sent to Rwamagana, only three made it, others were killed on the way. We managed to meet only three people after the Genocide. They actually had to leave separately,” said Bagabo.

Alphonsine Musabwamana confirmed that she would have died, had it not been for Mabare Muslims who rescued them from drowning.

“We came on April 10, and were welcomed by the Muslim men and women,” she said. The attack on the mosque left her with machete wounds on the head and neck, but she managed to flee.

Imam Bagabo, who praises RPF for ending the Genocide, said : “Life is back to normal, people once again feel like they want to live”.

Muslims different

Unlike other religions, before 1994, Muslim leadership in Rwanda kept encouraging believers not to get involved with genocide ideology.

The Mufti of Rwanda Muslim Community (RMC), Sheikh Salim Hitimana, said that what Imam Bagabo and other Muslims in Mabare did was a result of an announcement of RMC, published on March 12, 1992.

Signed by Sheikh Ahmad Mugwiza, then leader of the religion in the country, the message was denounced hate and division, Sheikh Hitimana said.

The Mufti explained that the Muslims published the statement in 1992 to distance themselves from the ideology of hate against the Tutsis that was growing at an unprecedented rate.

“The Muslim community had made the decision to distance themselves from the divisions, which eventually led the country to the Genocide against the Tutsi,” he noted.

The RMC head also pledged to build a monument at the mosque that collapsed.

Moved by the story, Haji Kharidi Nshuti, a businessperson who was present at the event, pledged to give Rashid Bagabo a ticket to go to Mecca in Saudi Arabia, for the Islamic pilgrimage.