

Nyange heroes look to inspire country's youth

James Karuhanga

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As Rwandans celebrate the 25th Heroes' Day today, survivors of the March 18, 1997 attack on ES Nyange school in Ngororero District have urged the nation's youth to step up and be counted for acts of bravery that involve putting others first.

This, they say, is the way to go if the country is to consolidate the achievements of recent years.

The survivors of the attack on ES Nyange School three years after the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi say that today's youth need to uphold national values and promote heroism as part of efforts to maintain the country's unity and development.

On the fateful March 1997 night, at around 8p.m, infiltrators commonly known as Abacengezi, entered the college, killed a watchman and quickly embarked on their wicked scheme – to identify and slaughter all Tutsi students.

Much to the killers' disbelief, and chagrin, the heroic students defied their orders to separate themselves along ethnic lines.

The killers demanded that the Hutu students identify the Tutsi amongst them so they could be killed. But the brave youngsters boldly told the attackers that they were all Rwandans and none of them deserved to die.

This prompted killers to shoot in-

discriminately at defenceless students.

Six students – Sylvestre Bizimana, Chantal Mujawamahoro, Béatrice Mukambaraga, Séraphine Mukarutwaza, Hélène Benimana, and Valens Ndemeye died on the spot.

About 40 others sustained injuries.

Call to shun destructive ideology

Phanuel Sindayiheba, 42, one of the surviving Nyange heroes, said : “My first message to our youth today is that they need to know that they have a mandate of protecting or consolidating the achievements of our heroes past and present.”

“I am talking about, among other things, the security of this country, not forgetting what was done to liberate it.”

Sindayiheba also wishes to see a creative young generation coming up with innovative ideas that take the country to another level.

Without innovations that help advance the country's development agenda, he noted, the youth will have failed in their duty to the nation.

“Third, and also important, is that our youth must not fall into the trap of being influenced by negative and destructive western ideology and culture

which undermines our good norms and values,” he added.

Owing to their bravery and solidarity, the Nyange students are categorised in the Imena category of national heroes.

Imena is the hero – after Imanzi, the supreme hero who demonstrated outstanding achievements characterised by supreme sacrifice such as the Unknown Soldier, who is reputed for his or her extraordinary acts for the country as characterised by supreme sacrifice.

Of the initial 40 survivors, eight have so far passed on. Immediately after 1997, six passed on. One died in 2001 after succumbing to internal wounds caused by grenade fragments. Another one passed on last year from illness.

But their legacy will live on forever.

Sindayiheba’s wife, Prisca Uwamahoro, a mother of three children, is also an Imena having been with her husband when attackers threw grenades and sprayed bullets indiscriminately at them 22 years ago. Today Uwamahoro is the Vice Mayor in charge of Social Affairs of Kamonyi District

Her wish is that the youth champion heroic deeds and be the future leaders the country deserves.

She said : “We want leaders who will take this nation to the next level, where it deserves to be. Only heroic youth make heroic leaders and citizens.”

The best today’s youth can offer the nation, she said, is live a life of integrity, patriotism, and endeavour to give up personal interests to defend the public’s interests.

“We need youth who are truly loyal to the country.”

Be wary of toxic social media

After what they went through, Claude Ntakirutimana, 40, an entrepreneur now keen on riding the country of electronic waste, said the youth should, above all, be wary of anyone trying to sow disunity.

Ntakirutimana said : “Our young generation and the youth should shun any form of disunity and grow in the spirit of unity.”

Also very critical lately, he noted, is that the youth need to be very alert as social media is dangerous.

“The youth today are hooked on social media sites which so often have very toxic messages. Care must be exercised to avoid the bad things on social media.”

The Executive Secretary of the Chancellery for Heroes, National Orders and Decorations of Honour (CHENO), Deo Nkusi, told The New Times that today’s youth do not necessarily have to take up arms – just like the liberators of the country did more than 25 years ago – to be heroes.

Nkusi said it is not arms only that bring about development, or peace.

“And nor are arms the only markers of heroes. Right now the most important war we are fighting is that of building and developing the country. We are looking at national wealth and good welfare,” he said.

“This means there will also be heroes who have not fought gun battles. There will be heroes of national development. Today, for example, if someone created a tool that solved most of our big development puzzles, don’t you think that person would be a national hero? If someone discovered Malaria vaccine, wouldn’t they be heroes?”

Heroism, Nkusi said, largely implies great acts of bravery that involve putting others first, even at one's own peril. In Rwanda, heroes are people with proven integrity, patriotism, vision and with a sense of purpose and direction, self-sacrifice by giving up personal interests to defend the public's interests, and are loyal to the country in many ways.

"This person is known for daring acts, courage or bravery. He or she must demonstrate self-dignity and is also known as not being selfish or materialistic but cares for other Rwandans. In the Rwandan context, a hero is no coward, does things for public interest and with integrity, and is courageous."