

# Rebels' Boy Army Shrugs off Ambush as Mere Irritation

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A yellow flame flashed under the small lorry carrying a wounded rebel of the Rwandan Patriotic Front and an anti-aircraft gun. The anti-tank mine flung the back end of the lorry into the air, catapulting the gun and the soldier uphill into a banana grove.

It was the third vehicle of their convoy destroyed within 100 yards. "What about the danger of ambush?" Commander William was asked. The commander, a thin man of about 35 who walked with his hands on his hips, said: "No ambush". His men, meanwhile, set off to retrieve dead and wounded colleagues from the bushes.

About a minute later, the government soldiers sent to harry the rebel advance west towards the government redoubt at Gitarama shouted insults and opened fire. The rebels were unmoved. To the uninitiated this might have looked like an am-

bush. To the rebels a few bullets whizzing overhead were minor irritations.

These fighters are not, however, wizened war cynics. The average age of the rebel troops must be about 18. Many of those in the convoy were no more than 14, but they behaved like veterans.

They thought it highly profligate that we opted to abandon our Jeep rather than, as suggested, try to drive around safe-looking parts of what was left of the dirt road, which was pockmarked with anti-personnel mines and anti-tank devices. In a guerrilla war a Jeep is worth more than a life, and that was all they proposed we should risk.

"This area has been infiltrated by saboteurs. In fact it is the front line," said Lieutenant Innocent Kabandana, 24. "Now if you will not drive, we will have to walk."

Commander William had left with his wounded soldiers in three lor-

ries. Three bodyguards stayed with us : Rugamba, 14, Nsoro, 16, and Nganizi, about 17. They set off along the dirt road like teenagers on an activity holiday. At nightfall they lengthened their stride.

The youths seemed unmoved by the stench of rotting corpses left from the massacres of Tutsi tribesmen and women carried out by the Hutu-dominated government army and supporting militias. They had seen the bloated corpses bobbing down the Nyabarongo river a few miles back and witnessed the dead in every village on the 150-mile journey along the front line. They had also heard about the people crammed into St Vincent's Church in Nyamata and slaughtered with grenades, rifles and clubs.

"If you don't take risks, you don't win a war," said the young lieutenant. This boy army, a force dominated by the handsome, minority Tutsi tribe but with at least 40% Hutu people, has taken two-thirds of Rwanda.

They approach the war without rancour. "We expected the massacres. We knew they were planned and we knew what to expect when we liberated areas. Whoever is responsible must answer to the law," said Captain Emmanuel Regema whose soldiers overran Nyamata.

None of the rebels would admit that he would like to kill the first militiaman he met, although there have been reports of summary executions. "It will not be easy but we are fighting this war for the liberation of all our people. Not just the Tutsi. It is not a tribal war, though one tribe has suffered most," the captain said.

More than 250,000 people, mostly Hutu, have fled into Burundi and Tanzania from the rebels' advances. Those left behind live without hindrance. The contrast with government-held areas, where everyone lives in terror, could not be more extreme.

From Sam Kiley in Kabuga.