

Rwanda's French Connection

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"We have 8 million people here," an aid worker told me last June in Rwanda, "and all you Americans care about are those damn gorillas."

I was in Rwanda investigating weapons trafficking for the Human Rights Watch/Arms Project, but I couldn't argue with the man, a Tutsi. Almost the only news reaching the West last year from this small, landlocked Central Africa republic was the death of Mrithi, a male silverback gorilla shot by a frightened soldier. One of 325 mountain gorillas in Rwanda, Mrithi was mourned in a *New York Times* op-ed by Rutgers University anthropologist Dr. H. Dieter Steklis. He succeeded Dian Fossey, the champion of the apes portrayed by Sigourney Weaver in *Gorillas in the Mist*. Apart from his brave Rwandan staff, Steklis made no mention of the country's people. At the time, 1 million of them were displaced from Northern Rwanda by the same fighting that killed Mrithi.

Last month, Rwanda's people finally got the world's attention, though accomplishing this took the fastest slaughter in memory, as many as 200,000 slain in a month. On April 27, Pope John Paul protested the killing as genocide. Most of the dead are Tutsi, a minority in a nation run by a small group of Hutu men. Government forces loyal to these Hutu men have

also targeted and killed their Hutu political opponents, including spouses and children.

Since 1975, Rwanda's Hutu regime has been a formal military ally of France, a relationship that has continued despite the April 6 apparent assassination of President Juvénal Habyarimana. On April 27, the same day the Vatican issued its moral plea, two top officials from Rwanda's newly declared government were received by the French foreign ministry. The next day, they were received at the Elysee, the presidential palace.

Rwanda's dictators have long been welcome in Paris. One of President Habyarimana's closest friends abroad was French president François Mitterrand, an interventionist throughout Francophone Africa. It has been reported from Kigali that their sons, Christophe Mitterrand and Jean-Pierre Habyarimana, have caroused together in discos on the Left Bank and in Rwanda at the Kigali Nightclub. At the Elysee, Christophe had been his father's special assistant on African affairs.

While it is unknown if President Mitterrand actually met with Rwanda's new leaders in the palace, he did receive a January 25 letter from the Human Rights Watch/Arms Project that identified France "as the major

military supporter of the government of Rwanda.... providing combat assistance to a Rwandan army guilty of widespread human rights abuses, and failing to pressure the Rwandan government to curb human rights violations.” Mitterrand has yet to respond.

The letter details Rwanda’s purchase of \$6 million in arms from Egypt, with the bill still unpaid. France guaranteed the payment for this March 1992 contract, which included 70 mortars, 16,200 mortar bombs, 2000 land mines, 2000 rocket-propelled grenades, plastic explosives, 450 automatic rifles, and more than 1 million rounds of ammunition. That’s merely a single transaction. In addition, France has provided troops, advisers, and other weapons.

Rwanda is one of 14 Francophone African nations, almost all of which have military pacts with France. With few resources and less industry, the country’s direct foreign investment is near zero. But like the United States allying with anticommunist states during the Cold War, France has allied with Francophone nations. Some, like Zaire, with 60 per cent of the world’s cobalt, are of economic value. But all of them, as a bloc, give France command of enough votes in the United Nations to enjoy the pretense of being a world power.

Like neighboring Burundi to the south, Rwanda was a Belgian protectorate until independence in 1962. Before then, the Tutsi dominated Rwanda from the 17th century until 1960. The king, nobles, military commanders, and, especially, cattle herders were predominantly Tutsi. Most people among the remainder were Hutu subsistence farmers. Although they have distinct characteris-

tics, Tutsi and Hutu are about as hard to tell apart as northern and southern Italians. Similar to northerners there, Tutsi have generally considered themselves superior.

In 1990, Tutsi guerrillas of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), many of them English-speaking, invaded Rwanda from English-speaking Uganda to the north. Belgium stayed relatively neutral, providing only non-lethal military aid to Rwanda. But France rushed in to defend the French-speaking Hutu regime, led by President Habyarimana and a group of men known as the Akazu or “Little House.” Over the next, three years, militant Hutu forces loyal them murdered up to 2000 Tutsi civilians. Although these abuses were documented by an international commission composed of Human Rights Watch/Africa and three Francophone monitoring organizations, France continued to defend Rwanda’s regime.

“Are you saying that the providing of military assistance is a human rights violation?” asked Colonel Cusac, his palm slamming his desk for emphasis. (The colonel, interviewed last June, wouldn’t provide his first name.) Noting that I am an American, the Colonel added, “France and the United States have a common history, for example, in Vietnam.”

More recent cases of intervention are also similar. France formally supported negotiations between Rwanda’s Hutu government and Tutsi guerrillas in the 1990s, much as the United States allegedly backed negotiations in the 1980s between El Salvador’s government and the guerrillas. But representatives of all the non-French Western diplomatic missions in Kigali said that France sought a clear victory for

President Habyarimana and the Little House. “Cussac is a man in favor of a military solution,” said one European chief-of-mission. “They continue to defend and sustain the regime.”

But on April 12, France closed its embassy in Kigali and its military assistance mission. Having armed the government and the party-led militias, who are most responsible for the massacres, France fled (as did most of the 2 500 United Nations troops), leaving behind a bloodbath, which also renewed the war between the Hutu government and Tutsi rebels. Even more astonishing, the French government has hardly said a word about a country whose fate it largely shaped. While the U.S. State Department studies the historic outbreak of “savagery” in Rwanda and the Vatican charges genocide, France keeps silent.

Last year, French soldiers manned check-points around Kigali. While some were armed with WASP 58 shoulder-fired rocket launchers, others demanded passing Rwandans to present their apartheid-like identification cards. The IDs were stamped Hutu (85 per cent of the population), Tutsi, or Twa (hunters and potters, about 1 per cent of the population).

Inside Kigali checkpoints were manned by Rwandan army soldiers. Aside from the capital’s few taxis, most vehicles on the streets were army jeeps, French armored vehicles, and Land Cruisers belonging to foreign relief organizations. Getting a job with one of them, becoming a military officer, or being a friend or collaborator of President Habyarimana or the Little House were the main paths of advancement.

Photos of Habyarimana, by law, had been posted everywhere, even in

the relief organizations. But when I arrived last summer, many portraits had been taken down. Rwanda’s political space was finally opening to Hutu opposition parties, and the Tutsi guerrillas were respecting the ceasefire. Yet Hutu opposition leaders were also being assassinated. While French and Rwandan officials alike blamed the RPF for these political killings, and other diplomats and surviving Hutu opposition leaders suspected the Little House.

“Shadow groups are behind the violence,” said Dr. Dismas Nsengiyaremye, one of several opposition party leaders. “Take the example of the mafia. Their chief may recruit from churches, the government, or private companies which allow him to conduct criminal activities without being seen. Here, the shadow groups are able to build connections to carry out criminal activities with impunity.”

Last June. Charles Nzabagerageza, a government minister who admitted to being a member of the Little House, denied any government responsibility for the Escadrons de la Mort (death squads), as they became known: “[The accusations are] the result of whimsical minds, fabricated by a newspaper, and inspired by certain political groups for purposes which are political.”

My month-long visit to Rwanda left me with images that recur in dreams. On a Sunday visit to a military hospital, for example, I saw two soldiers who had been wounded the week before. One suffered an open femur fracture and gangrene. The other’s blood was soaking through old gauze wrapped around his stomach. I asked a recovering one-legged soldier, “Why aren’t these men being treated?”

“Oh.” he said. “The doctors don’t

work weekends.”

On another day, Colonel Deogratias Nsabimana, who died with President Habyarimana in the April 6 plane crash, waved a stack of letters from Amnesty International activists at me. He wanted to know why he kept getting all these letters, worrying about prisoners of conscience in Rwanda’s jails. Despite his bewilderment, Colonel Nsabimana struck me as a serious military professional. There were some moderate officers in the Rwandan army.

Regardless, soldiers under them have long been notorious for their banditry. An American relief organization director told me that he was uncomfortable placing Western staff women near bases. Consisting of 5 000 soldiers in 1990, before France financed its expansion, the Rwandan army had grown to more than 30,000 men. While weakly trained, some troops were armed with Egyptian-made Kalashnikov AKM automatic rifles and superior South African R-4 automatic rifles.

Over the same period, the RPF grew from 7 000 to perhaps 15,000 guerrillas. Many carry Romanian Kalashnikovs and wear East German rain-pattern-camouflage uniforms. While many weapons were bought on the open market, Uganda donated to the RPF most of its other arms, including Soviet-made Katyusha multiple rocket launchers; landing in succession about 10 yards apart in fewer than five seconds per volley, their rockets spread shrapnel over an area wider and longer than a football field.

At their base camp near Mulindi in northern Rwanda during last year’s cease-fire, I saw RPF guerrillas marching shirtless and singing Tutsi folk and

war songs. They appeared to be a well-trained and highly motivated resistance movement. Some of their fighters and most of their leaders spoke English. Most came from refugee families who had fled Rwanda before its independence in 1962, when an earlier wave of Hutu attacks had killed 20,000 Tutsi and driven at least 150,000 to neighboring countries. Today, about 200,000 of them and their descendants live in Uganda. They have competed – sometimes violently – with its citizens, and suffered under both dictators Idi Amin and A. Milton Obote.

But in 1986, a guerrilla army led by a defected defense minister named Yoweri Museveni overthrew Uganda’s, government. About 2,000 Rwandan Tutsi, including Paul Kagame, fought with him. Museveni later put Kagame in charge of Ugandan military intelligence. In October 1990, more than half of the RPF’s invasion force, most of its weapons, and nearly all its leaders came directly out of the Ugandan army. President Museveni claims – still – that the deserters “stole” all the weapons they took with them. Kagame is currently the RPF top commander. At the RPF in Mulindi, Toni (his nom de guerre), an educated 30-year-old man with high cheekbones and a very soft manner of speaking, was the intelligence officer appointed to debrief me. Although soldiers served and saluted him, he claimed to be just another faithful recruit: “[What we] want is not necessarily to go back to [Rwanda], but to have a sense of national identity, to have citizenship, and the protection of the Rwandan flag.” That may be true for Toni. But many RPF guerrillas told me that they and their families want immediate repatriation.

The renewal of Rwanda's conflict came when the prospect for peace never seemed better: President Habyarimana had signed a peace accord with RPF leaders, and he had agreed to divide cabinet posts equally among them, the Hutu opposition, and the Little House. The Little House had never before shared power. Its members had created the Presidential Guard and ruling party militias.

Shortly after President Habyarimana was killed in his plane as it approached Kigali airport April 6, Little House officials declared themselves in charge. While some of them have said that Tutsi RPF guerrillas shot down the president's plane, the RTLM radio station the Little House controls said Belgian peacekeepers fired a rocket that brought the plane down. The assassination provoked a popular uprising, the Little House maintains.

Belgium's foreign minister, William Claes, however, said Hutu extremists assassinated the president in a palace coup. Belgian troops reported seeing a rocket fired from the direction of the Kanombe army base just east of the airport; further east are the headquarters of the Presidential Guard. Within minutes of the crash, armed militia loyal to the Little House set up roadblocks in Kigali. Hours later, officials from Belgium and elsewhere said, Presidential Guard units killed three opposition party cabinet members, including then interim prime minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana. She was murdered with 10 Belgian peacekeepers who had tried to save her.

For months, RTLM announcers had been inciting Hutu militiamen against Tutsi: "The grave is only half-full. Who is going to fill it up?" Since the president's assassination, RTLM

has been "calling on militias to step up the killing of civilians," according to UN spokesman Abdul Kabia in Kigali. Three weeks after the killings began, RTLM radio announced that Thursday, May 5 (when President Habyarimana was scheduled to be buried), would be the target date to finish "the clean-up" of Tutsi.

"When it comes to horror, this is one of the worst situations we have ever seen," said Tony Burgener, spokesman for the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva. (For diplomatic reasons, ICRC officials rarely comment on the record.) When the slaughter of the Hutu opposition and Tutsi families began, the main body of Rwandan army forces did not necessarily join in. Broadcast from Kigali, the army's radio said that "angry soldiers" had engaged in "shameful criminal acts." But expecting an RPF offensive, commanding officers failed to stop anyone from killing anybody.

When the bloodletting began, an RPF force of about 600 men was camped out in Kigali. The main body force of RPF fighters was still in and around Mulindi, 32 miles north. They began marching south. Destroying army positions along the way, they reached Kigali within five days. That day, April 11, French officials said they had no plans to leave. But the next day after the RPF began attacking Kigali, the French left.

Departing, French Legionnaire advisers predicted the government's fall, as did American intelligence experts. But while Tutsi RPF guerrillas secured the north central corridor from Uganda to Kigali, Hutu militiamen and their mobs' spread south, west, and east, killing more Tutsi families. Rather than then seizing control of a Kigali

stacked with corpses, the RPF declared a cease-fire, albeit short-lived since it was contingent on the government stopping the killings. But in doing so, RPF commander Kagame wanted to show the world that his force was disciplined and obedient. Since then, some RPF guerrillas have fought the army, while the rest have pursued the militias.

The RPF now controls at least half the country, and the fighting is fiercer than ever, especially in and around Kigali.

Although I lived in Kigali for a month last year, I find it difficult to imagine the current violence. But I still can clearly picture certain people. One is journalist Sixbert Musangam-

fura, the editor of *Isibo*, a weekly newspaper. During an RPF offensive last year the Rwandan army confiscated a Mercedes-Benz truck with Ugandan license plates. Uganda denied, and still denies, supporting the RPF. Although a Tutsi, like the RPF rebels, Sixbert confirmed the Rwandan army's account: By doing so, he helped France and Rwanda find a smoking gun, confirming their claim that Uganda supported the RPF. Nonetheless, after April 6, French-backed Hutu forces killed Sixbert, probably for being Tutsi. Among the dozen Rwandans whose cards are in my Rolodex, only two are known to be alive.

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