

Opinions

The fight against genocide denial is at a crossroads

Laetitia Tran Ngoc, Jessica Géron dal Mwiza

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Rwandans living here, or from the diaspora, like us, have long been accustomed to reading reports, articles, and other 'analyses' combining harsh criticism of the Rwandan government, an obsession for ethnic identities and a disturbing re-writing of the country's history.

In the past, we have both taken a stand in the public debate of our respective countries – France and Belgium – to confront and expose this discourse. Today, we are writing to sound the alarm over disturbing reality : even though Rwanda has gained credibility and currency on the international scene, we are on the verge of losing the media war.

Don't get us wrong. Rwanda itself is doing great. What the country has accomplished is nothing short of miraculous, and it is very easy to

be proud to be Rwandan. But as a people, as a community, we are failing. In this new reality where facts matter less and less, we are losing control of the narrative. The threat is getting bigger, and we are not responding appropriately.

A new narrative

There is nothing new about these attacks. For almost three decades, unfounded allegations have regularly held back our progress and damaged our international credibility. But though the ideas themselves are not new, the space in which they are disseminated has been transformed.

Crazy "controversies" thrive, without meeting resistance in mainstream media, in part due to the ignorance of the international public.

Words that would appear so ob-

viously dishonest to anyone with a basic understanding of our history are eaten up by groups easily moved by sentimentalism. People crave drama more than truth, a fact that has been recognised by deniers and their supporters, who push their agenda widely : from lecture halls to newspapers and politicians' offices.

This often puts us in situations where people will only believe what they want to believe and won't listen to your argument even if you slap the evidence in their face.

Rewriting history has a goal. Rwanda's enemies and detractors have dedicated themselves to planting seeds that question the legitimacy of everything that has happened over the last 30 years. The historical foundations of well-documented events – most significantly the genocide against the Tutsis – can thus be questioned, while deniers and survivors are presented to be two equally legitimate sides of an argument.

Lack of awareness and engagement

Another problem that we must acknowledge is that groups having an interest in rewriting history are better organised and use more sophisticated tactics.

This is, in part, due to an aware-

ness issue. Unless you are engaged in this fight on a daily basis, it is hard to realise the extent of the problem and its ramifications. Because we are facing permanent attacks, it is easy to see them as an unwelcome daily fixture and dismiss the seriousness of this threat. We fall into a resigned state, in which we brush off such attacks as inevitable or mostly harmless.

We also clearly face a generation gap. This is especially true for our generation and the one behind us. The devastation of the genocide compelled many Rwandans to fight for justice after 1994. Today, only a small minority of us seem to view it as a priority, and even fewer are prepared to fight for it. Organisations have seen a decrease in engagement.

In stark contrast to this attitude, in many countries, disparate, yet vocal groups are now uniting in a renewal of hostility towards Rwanda. On our side, it sometimes seems like younger generations are sleepwalking while enjoying the fruits of the work of their elders. In this context, it is becoming increasingly hard for the few people still engaged against deniers and revisionists to keep up the struggle.

But there can be no action without awareness. Current leaders – especially in the diaspora – must do more to raise awareness, maintain the energy of the movement, and

equip the younger generations with the tools to address the hurdles they will face.

Finally, too often – and we are also guilty of this – we focus on day-to-day emergencies. Our brain space gets engulfed by the pressures of everyday life, as a result, we lose track of our long-term objectives. Martin Luther King Jr once said, "*Those who love peace must learn to organise as effectively as those who love war*".

We have a big challenge in front of us. Are our elders doing enough to transmit this history and maintain the flame they once lit? Is our generation doing enough to learn and reflect?

Where do we go from here?

From the very start, recognition of genocide was met with pressure from génocidaires and their supporters – who actively angled to subvert history. The seeds they planted 30 years

ago are now blooming. History moves at great speed, and so does public perception. Deniers understand this perfectly well.

We have arrived at a critical juncture. We stand now where two roads diverge. We cannot be complacent or underestimate the magnitude of our challenge. Merely standing back would not just be dangerous but irresponsible. We need urgent action with the requisite speed to outpace our opponents. This must take place with a deliberate plan : we need an ambitious, all-encompassing strategy for the next 20 years.

In his speech on 7 April last year, President Kagame said : "*The Rwandans of today have something precious to defend. This requires constant vigilance, along with commitment*". In the years since 1994, a generation of brave men and women have transformed the country. Where do we go from here?

Laetitia Tran Ngoc and Jessica Mwiza are members of the Rwandan Community in Belgium.