

# Unsolved Rwanda Mystery: The President's Plane Crash

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KIGALI, Rwanda, Nov. 8— The death of Rwanda's President in a plane crash last April touched off a frenzy of killing : several hundred thousand people, most of them Tutsi, were slaughtered, mostly by Hutu soldiers and militia.

It was widely assumed, but never conclusively established, that the plane carrying President Juvenal Habyarimana was shot down. In any event, those responsible have never been identified.

But now some evidence has emerged — much of it from a Belgian investigation — to support the theory that extremist Hutu carried out the attack, and that foreigners were also likely involved, though whom the foreigners were working for remains a mystery.

Any inquiry inevitably confronts several theories for the plane crash that have come to be the most common explanations.

One widely held view is that it was the work of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, the Tutsi-led rebel army that has since defeated and replaced the Hutu-led Government. The other assumption is that extremist Hutu killed the President because he was about to bring the Patriotic Front into the Government, as required by a peace plan.

There have also been allegations of Belgian or French complicity.

One thing the theories have had in common is that they have been based on circumstantial evidence and political intrigue.

Those who believe the Hutu were responsible, for example, base their case generally on the fact that immediately after the plane crash, the army put up barricades around the capital and the killing began. Others counter that such a link is irrelevant, that the barricades went up quickly because the army was in the middle of a civil war, the capital was tense and when the President was killed the army simply reacted.

Like many political assassinations, the case will never be resolved to everyone's satisfaction.

The plane carrying the Rwandan President crashed on the evening of April 6. That morning, Paul Henrion, a Belgian national who has lived most of his 60-some years in Rwanda, was taking a boat engine that he had repaired to Lake Muhazi. On the outskirts of Kigali, as he drove past the village of Masaka, he noticed a military vehicle with a piece of artillery behind it, Mr. Henrion recalled in an interview here.

Mr. Henrion, who has also spoken

to Belgian investigators, said the presence of the artillery piece surprised him because under a peace agreement then in effect, heavy weapons were to be kept in compounds. So he ordered his driver to slow down. He then noticed that among the dozen black soldiers standing there, two were wearing Rwandan Army uniforms that were newer than the uniforms of the other soldiers.

Each had a weapon slung over his shoulder. These weapons were about four feet long and covered, Mr. Henrion said. But what stood out most, he said, was the manner in which they wore their berets. Rwandan soldiers wear their berets cocked over the right eye. These two soldiers, he said, were wearing theirs over the left.

Returning to Kigali early in the evening, Mr. Henrion said he drove past the same spot and the military post was still there.

Forty-five minutes later, President Habyarimana's plane, which was also carrying the Burundi President, Cyprien Ntaryamira, on a flight from Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, crashed. President Ntaryamira also died.

The missiles believed to have brought it down were fired from a shallow valley a few hundred yards from where Mr. Henrion had seen the soldiers, according to villagers in Masaka, who in interviews said they had seen flashes of missiles being fired and the plane go down.

The Belgian authorities, who have undertaken the most thorough investigation of the crash, have also determined that the missiles were fired from Masaka, a conclusion based on interviews with Belgian soldiers in Rwanda at the time.

The Belgian investigation is being

conducted by the Military Auditor's Department in the Belgian Ministry of Justice as part of a broader inquiry into the killing of 10 Belgian soldiers in Kigali the morning after the crash.

Because they have not yet closed their investigation, Belgian officials are careful to say publicly that they have not ruled out the possibility that it was the rebels who shot down the plane. But based on the evidence they have gathered so far, the Belgians are convinced that extremist Hutu were responsible.

According to Belgian military experts, the plane was hit by two surface-to-air missiles, probably Soviet-made SAM-7's.

In the view of a former Rwandan Minister of Defense, James Gasana, the presence of such weapons would support the theory that foreigners were involved because the Rwandan Government had never purchased surface-to-air missiles and Rwandan soldiers did not have training in their use.

Mr. Gasana, a political moderate who now lives in Switzerland, has not been interviewed by Belgian investigators. He said he believed the foreigners were in the pay of the Patriotic Front.

The Belgian investigators have concluded, however, that it would have been virtually impossible for a rebel soldier to have reached Masaka carrying missiles. It is only two miles from several well-protected Government installations, including Kanombe military base, the most important in the country, the presidential palace and the airport.

The Belgians believe that the two soldiers Mr. Henrion saw were French, possibly natives of Martinique or Guadeloupe, in the West Indies. French soldiers wear their berets cocked over

their left eye, and when on training missions in a foreign country, they wear the uniforms of the host country. By contrast, American military advisers wear American uniforms.

If French soldiers were involved, they could have been acting as mercenaries, not under orders of French officials.

The Belgian investigators also have a two-page, hand-written letter dated May 29 in which the writer says that two French soldiers were involved in the plot to kill the President. The writer said the two were working with the Coalition for the Defense of the Republic, a radical Hutu party. He said the President was killed to “spark off the carnage”.

The writer said that he was a senior militia commander and that his right arm had been torn off. “No doubt, I am going to die soon for lack of treatment,” he wrote, signing only his first name.

The letter was first delivered to a Belgian journalist, Colette Braeckman, who gave it to the Belgian investigators. It said that very few people were aware of the plot, other than four members of the Coalition, including himself, and the two apparently foreign soldiers.

“I will not give the names of the Rwandans, but one of the Frenchmen is called Etienne, I think,” he wrote.

In interviews here, three Europeans living in Kigali said they had known socially a French-speaking soldier named Etienne. They said the last they knew, he was stationed in Burundi, where he was involved in training the presidential guard.

The Belgian investigators have concluded that “Etienne” is a code-name. They say that they know his real

name, that he is a senior enlisted man, about 30 years old, who is an artillery specialist.

The Belgians are still looking for the author of the letter, and they suspect he may be dead. They have not interviewed “Etienne,” and they doubt the French or officials in Guadeloupe or Martinique will make him available. The Belgian investigators have received no cooperation from the French, according to Belgian officials.

Answers to most of the outstanding questions – and there are many – lie with the French Government, which had long backed the former Hutu-led Government with military training and with arms.

The French Ministry of Defense denied several requests, orally and in writing, for an interview for this article. A Defense Ministry spokesman who delivered the final no declined to be identified.

At the time the President’s plane was shot down, French soldiers were stationed at a military base near Masaka, and a French major, known to the Belgians only by his surname – de Saint Quentin – was at the scene of the crash shortly afterward.

Major de Saint Quentin was an adviser to the Rwandan paratrooper battalion. The plane crashed in the yard of the presidential residence, and pictures taken by members of President Habyarimana’s family show Major de Saint Quentin at the crash site at 7 A.M. the next morning as well, according to people who have seen the pictures.

But when the commander of the United Nations forces in Rwanda, Maj. Gen. Romeo Dallaire, sent troops to investigate, they were denied entry to the site by the presidential guard.

Pieces of the plane and photo-

graphs taken at the crash site are in the hands of the French Government. Contrary to reports, the plane carried no flight data recorder, according to Belgian investigators.

Photo : New evidence in the death of President Juvenal Habyarimana,

whose plane crashed in April, suggests that Hutu extremists were responsible. Rebel soldiers got their first look at the wreckage at the end of May. (Reuters)(pg. 3) Map of Rwanda showing location of Masaka. (pg. 3)