

Christine Kayitesi: My testimony

Many Rwandans like me left our much-loved “Country of a Thousand Hills” to escape the consequences of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. This is the major reason I’m writing this, to talk about my experiences during that horrible and painful time which led to a million deaths, with millions of casualties and a traumatised population. I personally survived horrors beyond any nightmare you may have had, and the images in my head are there for life.

On April 12, 1994 I was forced to watch as 26 members of my immediate and close family were murdered. About six thousand lives were lost in the parish where I took refuge.

Essentially, the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups are both Rwandan, with the same culture and language. Conflict between them began for several reasons, accentuated by the Belgian colonists who favoured the Tutsis. In October 1990, this erupted into open conflict, started by a rebel group of Tutsis who had not been allowed to come back peacefully to their home country.

On April 6th, 1994 Juvénal Habyarimana, a Hutu and the president of Rwanda, died in a plane crash. When my father (a Tutsi) heard about it the next morning, he came to our rooms saying, “Wake up, this is our last day - I’m sure we’ll be in the grave before Habyarimana.” As he predicted, an unofficial militia or *interahamwe* started to kill Tutsis just after the plane crashed. Every village had its organised group of Hutu attackers, ready to kill Tutsis in their neighbourhood.

Mukarange (where I lived) had a big percentage of Tutsis. Men like my father and uncles tried to form their own group in defence, to protect their families. The women and children gathered in three houses.

On Friday 9th April, the attackers arrived, burning houses and killing Tutsis the whole day. They were armed with guns and machetes, spears, arrows, clubs and stones. The next day, the big attack began. The militia came to the *mukarange* (like suburbs) to kill the thousands of Tutsis congregating in two churches. We had earlier run to one of them for protection.

One of the militia leaders called out: “If there is a Hutu in the church, they have to come out”. A Hutu lady married to a Tutsi went out with her three children. After that, the militia threw grenades in -I don’t know how many. I only saw a big ball of fire and fell to the ground. I pretended that I was dead.

The militia then came in, and killed nearly every single person with machetes or spears. I opened my eyes and saw my pregnant neighbor Concillia killed with a spear. As I was near a broken window I jumped out and escaped. My mother and my little sister Yvette, though, were killed in that church.

Too scared to run, I walked very slowly, and met my father, uncles and two neighbours, coming to see what had happened at the Anglican Church. I couldn’t say anything, only “Let’s run, let’s run!”

Tutsi people – men, women and children – were hiding in church-related buildings in Mukarange, and we took refuge in one. The weather was cold and rainy; children were crying, some people were singing praises, others were listening to the Rwandan Patriotic Front radio, which announced that help was on the way.

Outside, the *interahamwe* militia was also singing – but about finishing the killing as soon as possible. They then broke all the windows and threw grenades inside. In a room full of children, all were killed. A mother wouldn't have been able to recognize a single piece of clothing or a bone of the body of her child. I saw only a heavy river of blood coming from the door, and I'll never forget that.

Again I managed to escape, and went to the building next door. The next day they came in, eating roast meat, carrying machetes and spears, opening every door and putting everyone into groups (girls, boys, women, men etc.), so they could all be killed in the same way.

Some mothers, rather than see their babies killed by machete or spear, threw them into a deep water tank to drown, and then jumped in themselves. I saw many die in that tank, as well as many others who had been hit by grenades, thirsting as they lay dying. One of them included a Hutu parish priest who had tried his best to save Tutsi lives. He had refused to leave, and so he died like a Tutsi.

The killing went on and on all that day long.

I saw my brother Norbert and my four uncles, standing in the “male waiting line” killed – chopped in pieces. I was in the female waiting line. Then my turn arrived, and both my hands were held by men holding machetes. At the very last second, another man yelled out, “Leave that lady - first she can tell me where all her money is.” It was the voice of a former classmate of mine. To me, it was a voice from God, allowing me to live so I can tell this story, and what I saw with my own eyes.

Then a new ruling was made, for people to be killed in their family groups. My father was the first one killed in our family group; then they started on the rest of the family. When only my sister Jeanette (5 years old), my brother Gilbert (12 years) and I were left to be killed, another new rule was announced: that no females were to be killed. I eluded death yet again.

I was wearing a skirt over trousers. I quickly took off the skirt and gave it to my brother to put on, and so he too escaped. Today, he leads the youth choir at his university, with dreams to one day be a preacher.

Two days later I left that area, with thousands lying dead everywhere. It's estimated that six thousands Tutsis were killed in Mukarange Parish, twenty-six of them from my family. The same thing was happening in other different other parishes: Karubamba, Kabarondo, Rwamagana, Zaza, etc.

As we were walking, the killers caught us, saying we could be their wives when the killing was over. They took us to an empty house without doors or windows, not far from the parish. We were sitting and sleeping on the cement floor, very thirsty, hungry and dirty. The smell of decomposition was everywhere.

On the morning of 19th April, soldiers from the Rwandan Patriotic Front found us, and took us to a survivors' camp. Then we had time to talk to one another, and to cry and cry and cry over our beloved ones.

After two and a half months, we returned home. It was a scary, empty place – leaking, and without doors or windows. We couldn't do anything until we got some plastic sheeting to put in after a few days.

And so life went on...

Today, I can say: "I am a survivor." I don't have any physical scar to show for the trauma, but they are in my heart for life, with no hope of recovery from it. I feel sorry for those survivors who are physically or mentally traumatised. I think they must have nightmares every night about the genocide.

If I ever meet one of those killers, I will say: "Hi, are you OK?" because I know very well they weren't real people, they were DEVILS. I thank God I am alive, and to still have some of my siblings alive like me.

I pray a lot that genocide will never happen again in Rwanda, or anywhere else in the world.