

Working in development

My journey back to Rwanda: confronting the ghosts of the genocide 21 years later

As a UN investigator Lyal S Sunga witnessed the aftermath of Rwanda's genocide first hand. Now he returns to the country to make peace with his past



The Gisozi memorial in Kigali. Survivors donated photos to mark the country's 1994 genocide. Photograph: Radu Sighet/Reuters

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Friday 15 January 2016 10.45 GMT

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When I arrived in Rwanda on 29 October 1994, I could never have guessed how the experience would change my life.

I was deployed by the UN to conduct investigations and ghostwrite reports for the UN security council's Commission of Experts on Rwanda. In the aftermath of the violence that year, the commission, appointed by the then UN secretary-general Boutros Boutros-Ghali set out to determine the facts and responsibilities relating to the violations and to recommend measures the security council should take to restore the rule of law and accountability.

When I arrived, the country was one of the world's worst crime scenes: during the summer, between 500,000 and 1 million Tutsi and politically moderate Hutu civilians had been wiped out from Rwanda's population of 7 million.

What I saw

The first place I visited was Nyamirambo, a neighbourhood in the south-west part of Kigali. A few months earlier, around 6,000 people had been killed there over a three-day period. Buildings showed heavy machine-gun and rocket damage. Mass graves containing hundreds of men, women and children were found close by and not far down the road, stood a convent with blood-stained walls where nuns were gang-raped and massacred. We encountered a woman with her 10-year-old son who was grossly disfigured from a full force machete blow to his face. The mother showed us machete hack wounds at the back of her skull.

The days that followed, as we visited and investigated different sites, were harrowing. In Gikondo, another area of Kigali, we walked along the road surveying extensive damage to a mosque and a Methodist church from machine-gun and rocket fire. In the town parish, run by Polish Catholic Frères Pallottins, blood-stained ropes and pockmarks in the concrete floors were evidence of torture and summary executions. More than a hundred were killed there. Outside, the ground was dotted with mass graves, filled with half-burnt remains.

The next day, we travelled by helicopter to Ntarama, landing 70 metres downhill from a church where around 400 out of 5,000 bodies still lay unburied after an attack five months earlier. It was in that serene place where I first experienced the stench of decomposed human flesh; a sickly, sweet smell that is difficult to forget.

My colleague guided me across the threshold into Ntarama church and steadied me on the first-row pew. Rotting corpses filled every row of the church. It felt like the fear, panic and extreme distress of men, women and children in their final moments still hung in the air. The forensic team removed 252 bodies from that room alone and assembled a macabre arrangement of baby skulls for further analysis. Many trees stained with blood and rope pointed to where individuals were tortured and murdered. Witnesses told us how they had seen militia returning twice to the massacre scene within a few hours to wipe out any survivors.

Two kilometres away, we visited a medical dispensary run by a religious mission. In the corner of one room were the remains of a small boy, crouched with his back to the corner with a two-metre spear still stuck through his throat from front to back. His terrified expression and posture portrayed how he had been cornered, taunted and then speared.

On and on it went at massacre sites at Nyarubuye, Gafunzo, Cyangugu, Sake, Mbazi and others too numerous to count. When we returned to Kigali we trod carefully to avoid landmines and unexploded weapons - mindful of the many one-legged children we saw hobbling around the city. I plugged my nostrils with alcohol-soaked hand wipes, but it couldn't block out the stench of death. Walking alone behind the team on one trip I found myself treading on large, crunchy, dead scarab beetles that had eaten away human flesh: a carpet of the dead feasting on the dead.

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The skulls of victims at a memorial to over 11,000 Tutsi men, women and children (also buried here in a mass grave) who were killed while seeking refuge in the catholic church of Kibuye. Photograph: Andy Hall for the Observer

Returning home to Geneva: 'I felt terribly alone'

After leaving Rwanda in 1994, I tried to forget what I had seen, but the horror of what I had witnessed during these 10 days of intensive investigations was impossible to shake. Immediately after I returned to Switzerland I struggled to get out of bed and go to work - the contrast between home and what I had seen was too much. I lay in bed wondering how the international community could have failed to halt the genocide. I felt terribly alone in the feeling that strangers on the street must have had little idea what had happened in the country people called the "Switzerland of Africa". You try to forget, then without any warning something you hear, see or smell unleashes the memories: fear, panic and then profound sadness soon follow.

And yet I was aware that my flashbacks, mercifully few and far between, provide only a fleeting glimpse into the enormous suffering of hundreds of thousands of victims and survivors. In late 1994 many people throughout Rwanda were fearful of the neighbours who had joined in on the murderous onslaught. In the months following the genocide many villagers had to live month after month among the dead, too numerous to be buried. Who among them could board a plane to rich and peaceful Switzerland like I did?

'I returned to the same church I stood in 21 years before'

The security council acted swiftly on the commission's findings and recommendations on 8 November 1994 by establishing the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) to prosecute those responsible for genocide and other serious violations of international humanitarian law in Rwanda committed during 1994.



21 years after his first visit, Lyal returned to the Ntarama church in December 2015. Photograph: Mona M'Bikay Bolin

Last month, after 21 years of investigations and trials, the ICTR closed, ending an important chapter in international efforts to enforce criminal responsibility for the atrocities. The tribunal has indicted 93 individuals and convicted 61. But not all of the thousands of perpetrators went through Rwanda's customary gacaca trials that ended in June 2012, and so Rwanda, together with other countries, still has to hunt down the remaining suspects, provide them with a fair trial and punish the guilty.

On 1 December I attended the ICTR's closing ceremonies in Arusha, Tanzania, less for the proceedings themselves than for the chance to seek closure from what I saw in Rwanda 21 years ago. After the event, instead of returning directly home, I headed for Rwanda. I had to find out whether a country could recover from such violence. Could justice, economic development, political inclusiveness and the rule of law somehow vanquish ghosts of the past?

I returned to Ntarama church to stand for a moment on the same pew where I had stood 21 years before. The bodies of hundreds of massacred children, women and men had long since been moved into caskets. This time, I didn't have to watch my every step for fear of treading on human remains, for now a neat, clean path led visitors around the massacre site.

People were alive, working, talking, and smiling, and the gently reassuring hum of traffic replaced the silence and human stench of 1994. A guide led me to the entrance of another much smaller structure where human remains, a reminder of the tragedy, lay similar to the way I had seen them over two decades ago, tangled up in tragic embrace. What I saw reminded me too much of what I saw 21 years ago: I turned away and quickly re-entered the sunlight.

Ignoring personal ghosts, or those of an entire country traumatised by war and genocide, is futile and even dangerous. On returning to Rwanda, and seeing how the country has progressed, I was reassured of the power of confronting the past. But to properly heal, the fight to restore justice, preserve the rule of law and democratic governance, must continue.

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- BananaRepublic** 15 Jan 2016 15:34
"The security council acted swiftly on the commission's findings and recommendations on 8 November 1994 by establishing the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR)"
With all due respect, the security council (which, ironically Rwanda was part of at the time of the genocide, go figure) did nothing to act swiftly to end the genocide in 1994.
As massacres by the RPF and extremists continued unabated on the streets of Kigali and elsewhere in the countryside for weeks on end, the security council sat down in New York and turned a blind eye to daily reports of atrocities. It pretty much created an isolated, under-staffed, ill-equipped and useless UN peace keeping force on the ground. Despite constant cease fire violations between the RPF and RPF, mass murders, rapes and summary executions of Tutsi and moderate Hutus alike, the international community refused to strengthen UNAMIR by sending troops, equipment, food and medical supplies. If anything, the delay caused thousands of Rwandan lives to be lost.
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- ID9735781** → BananaRepublic 15 Jan 2016 19:00
You're right the UN should have done more but then the international community were reluctant to send in troops. The US especially refused to call it a genocide as it meant certain legal obligations. The French have also escaped repercussions for their involvement in getting some of the main perpetrators out of the country. Dallaire only had a rag bag bunch of soldiers after the Belgians pulled their troops out. The UN were responsible for not listening to the intelligence Dallaire sent them but the rest of the world stood by and watched and refused to send troops.
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