

Genocide in Rwanda 1994

Introduction

“When I came out, there were no birds,” said one survivor who witnessed the genocide. “There was sunshine and the stench of death.” The sweetly sickening odor of decomposing bodies hung over many parts of Rwanda in July 1994: “all around there were skulls and bones, torn clothing...bodies lay twisted and heaped on benches and the floors of churches...the cadaver of a little girl, otherwise intact, had been flattened by passing vehicles to the thinness of cardboard in front of some church steps...pieces of human bodies had been thrown down the hillsides...fragments of bone were found in the sand boxes of the schoolyard...and nearby on a hill, a small red sweater held together the ribcage of a decapitated child.” These are all accounts from witnesses of the horrors of genocide. Beginning on April 6, 1994 and for the next hundred days up to 800,000 Tutsis were killed by the Hutu militia. The Rwandan Genocide was one of the violent and barbaric acts in world history.

1. How does the witness describe Rwanda in 1994?

The Background of Rwanda

Rwanda is one of the smallest countries in Central Africa and is comprised of two main ethnic groups, the Hutu and the Tutsi. The Hutu make up 90% of the population. The Tutsi minority was considered the aristocracy and dominated the Hutu peasants for decades. The problems for Rwanda begin after WWI, when Belgium was given the territory. The Belgians transformed the majority Tutsi elite into the *solely* Tutsi elite, with position in society determined by ethnicity. Colonial identity cards used ethnic affiliation as classification. The Tutsis enjoyed privileged status under Belgian rule and were able to secure better jobs and better education than the Hutu for many decades. Belgium eventually lost control in 1962 when Rwanda gained its independence.

1. What role did the Belgians play in Rwanda?
2. What were the signs of discrimination?

The Problems Begin

Following independence from Belgium, the Hutu majority seized power and reversed roles with the Tutsi. They oppressed the Tutsi through systematic discrimination and acts of violence. Tutsis fled to neighboring countries and formed a rebel guerilla army, the Rwandan Patriotic Front. In 1990, the rebel army invaded Rwanda and forced the Hutu President Habyalimana to sign an accord that mandated that the Hutu and Tutsi would share power. Ethnic tensions in Rwanda were significantly heightened in October 1993, when the first popularly elected president of Burundi was assassinated.

A UN peacekeeping force of 2,500 soldiers was sent to Rwanda to preserve the cease-fire between the Hutu and Tutsi. But on April 6, 1994, Rwandan President Habyalimana and the new President of Burundi were assassinated when a missile destroyed the plane they were in. Immediately after their deaths, Rwanda plunged into political violence as Hutu extremists began targeting prominent opposition. They created death-lists with many important names on them.

1. What happened after Rwanda received their independence?
2. What happened in Rwanda after April 6th?

Genocide

The killings spread throughout the countryside as Hutu militia, armed with many different weapons began indiscriminately killing Tutsi civilians. Everyone in Rwanda carried ID cards specifying their ethnicity; these ethnic “tribal cards” now meant the difference between life and death.

The U.S, Italy, France and Belgium began to evacuate their men from Rwanda in mid-April 1994. However, no effort was made to evacuate Tutsi civilians or Hutu moderates. Instead they were left behind to face an almost certain fate. Back at UN headquarters in New York, the killings were at first categorized as a breakdown in the cease-fire between the Hutu and Tutsis. Both the UN and U.S did not use the word genocide to describe this tragedy. On April 21, the Red Cross estimated that over 200,000 Tutsi had been slaughtered. The UN Security Council responded to the worsening crisis by voting unanimously to abandon Rwanda. The remaining UN peacekeeping troops were pulled out, leaving behind about 200 soldiers to defend the entire country.

1. What role did the UN play in the Rwandan Genocide?
2. Why did it fail?

The Effects and the End

The Hutu engaged in genocidal mania, clubbing and murdering defenseless Tutsi families. The Rwandan state radio encouraged the killing by playing non-stop propaganda and even announced the locations of Tutsis in hiding. Many Tutsis took refuge in churches and mission compounds. These places became the scenes of some of the worst massacres. In one case, at Musha, 1,200 Tutsis who had sought refuge were killed beginning at 8 am and lasting until the evening. Hospitals also became prime targets as wounded survivors were sought out and then killed. In some local villages, militiamen forced Tutsis to kill their neighbors and also to murder members of their own families.

By mid-May, an estimated 500,000 Tutsis had been slaughtered. Bodies were now seen floating down major rivers in Rwanda and shown on international television. After this, the UN sent up 5,000 soldiers to aid Rwanda, but the soldiers were not sent in time to stop the massacre. The killing ended when armed Tutsi rebels from neighboring states managed to defeat the Hutu. They did this and halted the genocide in July 1994. By then, one-tenth of the population, 800,000 people, had been killed.

1. What role did the media play in Rwanda?
2. How did the killing come to an end?

Relief Efforts and Justice

Many people were responsible for the genocide in Rwanda. When Hutu refugees were located in 1996, the genocide trials could begin. But it wasn't until 2001 when the government set up a new justice system to process court cases faster. The UN set up the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda; this was used to process high levels members of government and armed forces. The Rwandan government had to prosecute lower level government officials and local criminals. This however, is not helping the country recover from the aftermath of the genocide. But one element of hope is that in March 2005, the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda finally condemned the genocide of 1994.

1. What role did the UN play in recovery, and how did it help?