RWANDA: 15 Years after the Genocide. Is Healing Possible?

Beatrice Spadacini (March 26, 2009)

It took the International Criminal Court in Tanzania 15 years to convict one of the masterminds of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, Colonel Théoneste Bagasora. But just on the eve of the 15th anniversary of the genocide that saw more than 800,000 people brutally murdered in less than 100 days, this verdict came as a great victory for the people of this small land locked nation in central Africa.

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Colonel Bagasora was among those who supported and armed Hutu Power, the militias that systematically killed hundred of thousands of Tutsis and moderate Hutus, including the then Prime

Minister and other prominent cabinet members.

His long awaited for conviction represents yet another step towards the healing of a nation that is eagerly striving to move forward and to become a model African country. * (See Rwanda at a glance table)

Every year during the month of April, the people of Rwanda, led by their President Paul Kagame — a former leader of the Rwandan Patriotic Front [3] that put an end to the likes of Bagasora and liberated his country from the grip of the genocidaires — dedicate time to remember the dead and the events that led to 1994.

In Rwanda the color of April is purple.

It is the color of mourning that adorns wristbands, wreaths and tombstones. Bracelets that read 'genocide, never again' are worn by Rwandans and visitors alike in an attempt to honor the memory of the dead and to declare that what happened in their country 15 years ago is simply not acceptable, nor justifiable, under any circumstance.

Every April there are prayer vigils, proper burials of bodies that are still being found in mass graves scattered across the country-side, formal speeches and informal breakdowns. It is not uncommon during mass gatherings to witness survivors of the genocide experience panic attacks as they revisit the horrors of the past and confront their personal memories.

All of this is deemed necessary for the healing of the nation.

"Reconciliation is not magic," says Rt. Rev. John Rucyahana, Bishop of the Shyira diocese in Rwanda [4] and Chair of the Rwanda Prison Fellowship [5].

"It is a slow and painful process that has many ups and downs. It is our reality and we must move forward. We don't have time to wait until all the healing is done. We must dig with one hand and do the work while we wipe away our tears with the other."

Reverend Rucyahana is also the founder of the Sonrise primary and secondary schools [6] in Musanze, in the region of the volcanoes and the gorillas. The school, which opened in 2001, has more than 900 pupils. Three fourths of them are orphans, many as a result of the genocide but others from the scourge of AIDS.

In 1994 the Bishop was on a teaching fellowship to America. When he saw images on TV of the bodies of his people floating on the Kaghera river towards Lake Victoria, he cut his mission short, returned to Uganda where he had spent 30 years in exile, and with ten pastors traveled by minibus to Rwanda.

"Deep in my heart I knew that reaching out to the orphans was going to be necessary otherwise we would have lost yet another generation," says Rucyahana as he stands in front of Sonrise School. "Here we fight the scourge of stigma by mixing children who are orphaned with others from well-to-do families. Our vision is to strive for academic excellence so that all the children can work towards rebuilding this nation."

It is ordinary people like Bishop Rucyahana who are spearheading extraordinary initiatives that are making a tangible difference in the slow and often difficult healing and reconciliation process of Rwanda.

Another stepping stone in this process is the Gacaca, the traditional court system that in Kyniarwanda language literally means "justice on the grass." These are community-based neighborhood tribunals that bring together victims and perpetrators of the genocide to expose those who did wrong and issue a collective sentence.

Those who go through the Gacaca court system are not the high-level organizers and planners of the genocide like Colonel Bagasora but the common executioners, those who went along with the killing

spree because of manipulation, fear and ignorance.

The Gacaca system was reinstated by President Kagame after the genocide as an attempt to decongest the prisons and process some of the more than 200,000 people who had been arrested. As a result, since 2003, more than 70,000 prisoners have been released and reintegrated back into their communities.

Some of the prisoners who confess in the Gacaca courts end up in one of the three experimental reconciliation villages in Rwanda today. Here they live side by side with survivors and Diaspora Tutsis.

Mbyo village consists of 45 households. Aloise is one of the residents of Mbyo village. He spent nine years in Rilima prison. He was assigned a home here in 2003, after he confessed to the crimes he committed during the genocide.

“I used to ask myself how could we live side by side with people we hurt so much? There was a wall of separation between us and them. We started by sharing meals and with the help of God it has been possible for us to live together. They accepted to forgive us. We were all in a similar position. We did not have homes. Everything had been destroyed.”

Pastor Déo Gashagaza is one of the people who facilitate the reintegration of former prisoners into villages like Mbyo. One of his responsibilities with the Prison Fellowship of Rwanda is to council ex convicts and survivors alike, emphasizing the need to regain trust and learn to live together again in a new Rwanda.

In some ways, says Gashagaza, it is easier for ordinary people to forgive one another then highly educated ones who often have stronger ideologies and beliefs. Ordinary Rwandans, he adds, especially those who live in rural areas, are poor and lacking basics like shelter, food and water. Poverty is a powerful equalizer.

Sitting next to Aloise is Jeanette, who is in her early thirties. She is a genocide survivor. Her entire family was killed in April 1994. She was lucky to have found refuge in a church until the Rwandan Patriotic Front made its advance into Kigali and people ventured out of their hiding places.

“I was introduced to Aloise by the pastor,” says Jeanette. “He had been freed from prison and I was afraid that he would finish me off. We began by making bricks together. Slowly, through the work of the church, we warmed up to one another. He asked us survivors for forgiveness. Now my children and his play together.”

Gashagaza, a member of the Tutsi ethnic group, also visits the prisons to console people who only fifteen years ago were eager to slaughter him. He offers spiritual redemption through prayer and compassion. He organizes carpentry workshops for male prisoners, weaving and sewing for the females and sports tournaments for all so that none of the prisoners is “idle and prone to dwell on negative thoughts.”

His courage and commitment are remarkable.

Damas Mutenzintare Gisimba runs an orphanage in Kigali that is now home to 186 abandoned children. A portrait of him hangs in the Kigali Genocide Memorial [7]. In 1994 he saved more than 400 people. He is a soft-spoken and gentle man who inherited the Gisimba Memorial Center from his father and grandfather and humbly carries on the family legacy.

“They [the killers] tried to come in many times. The first time I gave them food. The second time I gave them money. Then I ran out of both and I just found the words. These are just children, I would tell them. Maybe they are your cousins. I take in everyone.”

One of the children who survived is 14-year-old Kevis. “He was found on the back of his dead mother, still alive, by a Red Cross worker who then brought him here to me. I knew all his relatives. When I tell him his story, he is relieved that I knew his family.”

Many of the children staying at the orphanage are a result of the AIDS scourge that left many people, especially women who were raped during the genocide, infected with the HIV virus. It was a renowned policy of the Interahamwe militias to have men infected with HIV rape women during the 1994 genocide.

According to a study conducted by the Association of the Widows of the Genocide (AVEGA [8]), a government sanctioned organization that operates across the country, 67 per cent of the widows interviewed a couple of years after the genocide were infected with HIV.

Asumpta Umurungi is the Executive Secretary of AVEGA. She is a widow and one of the 50 founding members of the association that now runs health clinics, income generating activities and offers legal services across the country for the widows of the genocide. The peace baskets is one of the best known initiatives this group has spearheaded, one that is now part and parcel of the national reconciliation process.

Umurungi says the term ‘peace basket’ was coined after one member of the original founding group traveled to Geneva to attend a peace conference in 1995. “When she offered the organizers a handmade straw basket from Rwanda, she told them to fill it with peace so that she could bring it back to her country.”

Peace baskets can now be seen all over the country, on the shelves of boutiques in Kigali, in rural market places and even in the prisons. Their light pastry color and distinct pointed shape have become a symbol of post-genocide reconciliation while the project itself has taken on a life of its own and expanded way beyond AVEGA.

A lucky break came when, for two consecutive years, they broke into the major US retail chain Macys. The baskets are usually made by groups of widows from both ethnic groups. “Working together promotes reconciliation,” says Umurungi. “Families whose relatives are in prison work side-by-side with those whose loved ones have been killed.”

Weaving baskets generates much needed income for the widows, a forth of whom are still homeless as a result of the destruction unleashed during the genocide. From a group of 50 widows AVEGA has grown to more than 25,000 members.

“I have no doubt that reconciliation can happen,” says Umurungi, “but this is a slow process. Sometimes you don’t even know whom to forgive. Other times you may meet people who are still hostile and this can set back the forgiveness process.”

Perhaps one way to promote peace and reconciliation in a society that has been ripped apart is through the arts. This is where people find creative outlets to express their emotions and feelings.

Carole Karemera certainly thinks so ever since her debut as an actress in Rwanda94, a powerful six-hour play produced by Philippe Tashman and directed by Grupov, a Belgian experimental theater. The performance toured Rwanda in 2004 on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the genocide.

“It was really intense. Thousands of people cried silently. It was one of the most powerful and difficult experiences of my life,” says Karemera as she recalls performances in the cities of Butare, Bisesero and Kigali.

Karemera, who was born in Bruxelles from Rwandan parents and claimed her Rwandan citizenship in 1996, believes art and culture have an important role to play in the healing of the nation. She thinks artists have a responsibility to nurture and protect creativity in this new and fast-paced Rwanda.

“In my opinion,” she says, “the genocide also happened because culture was eradicated. Through the arts we can create a vital space for feeling, reflecting and questioning. Art can help us share. People cannot carry such sadness inside.”

For this purpose Karemera has established Ishyo, an association of women artists that aims to make

culture accessible to everyone. One of their projects is Bibliobus, a traveling library bus that serves over 1200 children in Kigali.

People often wonder whether reconciliation is truly possible in Rwanda given the events of 1994. As Bishop Rucyahana never tires of saying, “reconciliation is not magic and it is painful.”

The real challenge now, according to Fatuma Ndagiza, the Executive Secretary of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission, is the healing of the individuals, which takes place at different times and on different levels.

This is where ordinary people that do extraordinary work can make a tangible difference.

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