

Rwanda: Refugees and Genocidaires

 web.archive.org/web/20161116162554/http://www.crimesofwar.org/a-z-guide/rwanda-refugees-and-genocidaires/

By Lindsey Hilsum

She was a broad-hipped, middle-aged woman in a Virgin Mary blue dress, one of a million Rwandan Hutu refugees. Her job was to trace the families of orphaned and abandoned children in a refugee camp in eastern Zaire.

But Paulina Nyiramasuhuko had a past. In April 1994, when the genocide of Rwanda's Tutsis and opposition-Hutus was under way, peasant farmer Grace Hagenimana saw Nyiramasuhuko address a meeting at a place called Runyinya. She came to encourage the people to kill. I saw her in a car with gendarmes as escorts. She said, you must start work, you must chase out the enemies. Then people picked up their machetes. Hagenimanas husband was among those killed.

Nyiramasuhuko now awaits trial at the International War Crimes Tribunal in Arusha, Tanzania, where she has been charged with genocide, complicity in genocide, crimes against humanity, and serious violations of Article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, and of Additional Protocol II. Her story exemplifies international ambivalence toward the war criminals who led the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. As minister of women, Nyiramasuhuko was one of the best-known, most easily identifiable members of the government that orchestrated the slaughter. But she escaped to Zaire through the Zone Turquoise, the area controlled by French forces whose aim was supposedly to bring humanitarian relief and protection to the victims. Once in the refugee camp near Bukavu, she was employed by the Spanish chapter of the Catholic relief organization Caritas (Latin for "loving care") as a social services coordinator. For three years, she traveled undisturbed between Zaire and Kenya. She was finally arrested in Nairobi in July 1997 after the current Rwandese government pressured President Moi.

Failure to apply international law at critical moments has prolonged the suffering of the people of central Africa. Huge sums in emergency aid money have been spent, at the expense of rebuilding the regions economy.

The French government, under President François Mitterand, never hid its antipathy to the Anglophone Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF), the guerrilla army whose military victory ended the genocide. The French allowed dozens of known genocidaires," including Pauline, to transit the Zone Turquoise, escaping the tightening noose of the RPF.

The killers reinvented themselves as leaders of refugee camps, supported by international aid agencies, under the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). International obligations under the humanitarian law and the Genocide Convention were subjugated to a general desire to save lives. The guilty were fed alongside the thousands of children whose images haunted Western television viewers. The administrative structures that had facilitated the killing in Rwanda were reproduced in the camps.

Those who had fled justice were never separated from those who had not killed. It was never defined whose responsibility such a difficult and dangerous task might be. This failure resulted in a violation of international law. The camps became safe haunts for war criminals, and bases for guerrilla attacks aiming to destabilize Rwanda, where the new Tutsi-led RPF government was trying to consolidate its power.

When Rwandan government soldiers attacked the refugees in November 1996, exercise books detailing terrorist tactics and the Hutu extremist version of history littered the abandoned camps. Faced with the evidence of what they had succored, one senior aid worker said: We never knew what went on at night.

The violent breakup of the camps forced most refugees back to Rwanda, but several hundred thousand fled deep into the jungles of eastern Zaire, soon to be renamed Congo. The evidence of terrified eyewitnesses suggests that Rwandan government soldiers—many of them relatives of the victims of genocide—massacred thousands. Rwandan government representatives have at times denied the killings and at other times justified them under international law, saying the victims were known genocidaires, planning to invade Rwanda using children and other refugees as a human shield. But the countenance of survivors, weakened by their odyssey through the bush, suggested that these pathetic, desperate people no longer constituted an actual threat to the well-equipped Rwandan forces. It has been argued that the killings of Hutus in the jungles of Congo were unprovoked attacks on civilians and refugees, therefore war crimes.

Now Hutu extremist rebels mount hit-and-run raids on Tutsis and army installations inside Rwanda, while government soldiers move against Hutus they suspect of supporting the rebels. Rwanda remains a land of fear, mistrust, and death.

So the international failure to move rapidly against war criminals has condemned central Africa to a still unbroken cycle of violence and impunity.