

## **Moving On: The Rwandan Genocide**

*July 26, 2010*

250,000 bodies are buried in a small mass grave outside Kigali's Rwandan Genocide Memorial. After a century of successful divide & conquer tactics by the Belgians and thirty years of sporadic post-independence violence, the tension between the Hutus and Tutsis came to a head in 1994. National radio, television, and newspapers had already paved the way for massacre by labeling the Tutsis as less than human, by instilling fear of them and turning it into mindless rage. Hutu militia groups stockpiled weapons provided by the French, and lists were drawn up by extremist Hutu politicians. This was planned.

When the president's plane was shot down in April 1994, road blocks went up within hours. Moderate Hutu politicians were assassinated. Any Tutsi found at these road blocks was shot or hacked to death with machetes. Mobs went door to door, torturing, raping, murdering Tutsis and any Hutu who "fraternized" with them. Friends turned against friends, family members against family members, pastors against their own congregations. Men, often with HIV, spent three months raping women & children, either killing them after or leaving them to suffer a more prolonged death. Children were thrown into septic tanks and latrines and covered with rocks until their screams finally stopped. In the memorial I see the rusted chains that held a couple together as they were buried alive. I see pictures of the charred remains of the weak and elderly who hoped to find safety in a church but were instead burned alive inside. I see videos of children who survived but with machete wounds carved across their faces or along the stubs where their fingers used to be. I can't stop my mind from trying to imagine what all these people were thinking before they died, what they felt, and I've never been so overwhelmed by emotion. I try to wrap my mind around those who did this and find I can't even begin to comprehend. I can barely recognize them as human.

Soon after the genocide started the UN Security Council passed a resolution deploring the violence...and withdrawing the remaining UN troops. It wasn't until after the murder of almost a million that we came back.

I go upstairs where giant photos of children hang above plaques. There's Fillette, 2 years old, favorite food: rice & chips; smashed to death against a wall. Therry, 9 months, loved her mother's milk; killed by a machete in her mom's arms. Manni, 12, whose last words were "Where can I run to?" right before she was shot to death. And there are more. So many more. Each has a story, each has a face, each suffered death in the most deplorable of circumstances and I can't stop the rage building up inside me. I want to scream and swear and tear apart the people who did this because maybe that will right all the vicious wrongs that were committed here. I ask myself that eternal question that can never be fully answered: How can people take such pleasure in causing such pain?

And it's the same question that tears at me everyday when I see people treat others like shit just because they had a bad day or just because they can. Either way, it's dehumanizing. Either way, it's beastly.

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How can a people like this go back to where they were before, after so much horror, after so much death and destruction? And this answer is simple: they can't. But they can move on. Sixteen years later, slowly but surely, Rwanda is moving on.

This is why I believe so strongly in the power of education: to help us reflect upon the wounds of the past so we can grow from them, to examine the effects our words have on each other, to instill in all of us that every senseless death is a genocide, that how we treat others matters. I believe all of us can model this. I believe this is how we can all move on from horrors like this, and prevent them from happening again.

In a room full of the frozen faces of children, these are the thoughts I cling to, hoping that somehow they'll stop the tears from falling.