

The meteoric rise of Rwanda

Exhibits tell of long road travelled from massacres to peace, writes **Kevin Ritchie**

IT WAS the genocide the world expected South Africa to have – instead we gave birth to a miracle. On the evening of April 6, 1994, President Juvenal Habyarimana of Rwanda and his colleague Cyprien Ntaryamira, then president of Burundi, perished when the aircraft they were in was shot down on final approach to Kigali airport.

Within an hour roadblocks had been set up.

Shortly thereafter shots began to ring out over Kigali as the death squads moved in, going door to door.

There was no science to the slaughter, not in the beginning; Tutsis were clubbed, hacked to death with everything from garden hoes to spades and the ubiquitous panga. The shooting, the grenading of 30000 at Gatwaro stadium would come later. In the beginning it was just about ticking off the pre-prepared death lists.

The groundwork had been laid for years – the Belgians bear responsibility for making what was essentially a class distinction a racial one, the Catholic church perfected it, human selfishness did the rest.

There had been attacks before, dating all the way back to before Rwanda's independence in 1961; leading to the first wave of Tutsi refugees fleeing to Uganda in the north after the first massacre of Tutsis in 1959, one of them being Paul Kagame himself.

The hatred this time had been ramping up; the economy tanked in the late 1980s putting pressure on the ruling Hutu elite. Kagame had begun a successful incursion with Tutsi rebels from the north, many of them drawn from the same refugee camps forged during their time in the Ugandan army.

The world wanted the Hutus and Tutsis to forge a government of national unity with an integrated civil service and army following the Arusha Peace Accord signed in Tanzania late the year before.

The Hutus though were having none of that. The Interahamwe, a youth militia was under training, the Hutu-dominated media, notably the rabidly racist Radio Television Libre Des Mille Collines set up during the peace talks, was inciting not just racial violence, but genocide. And then there were the Hutu 10 commandments, a parody of the Mosaic injunctions, issued in 1990 as the doctrine of Hutu Power began to take shape. The "commandments" left no room for any misunderstanding; any contact by Hutu men with Tutsi women was tantamount to racial treason, any business relationship with a Tutsi likewise. No teachers should be Tutsis, nor soldiers. And finally, any Hutu who refused to spread this new gospel would be a traitor too.

There had also been warnings as far as back as January, but they went unheeded at UN headquarters in New York.

As the killings spread across the country, some Tutsis were encouraged by the Hutu government to seek shelter, as they had done in massacres past, in schools and churches. This time there was no safe haven. In Kibuye, refugees were massacred in church on April 17. The next day those told to take shelter in Gatwaro Stadium faced the baying mob. Soon the stadium was a sea of blood, so much so that the people covering there were baptising themselves in each other's blood, preparing for death.

When the slaughter abated, the victims begged them to finish. The killers left. Then they came back the next day and finished what they had started.

Three days later, on April 21, the UN met to pass a resolution condemning the killing "appalled at the ensuing large-scale of violence in Rwanda" and then promptly voted



A visitor to the Kigali Genocide Memorial in Rwanda ponders the last resting place of the 259000 victims reburied there, following the 100-day genocide of more than 1 million Tutsis and moderate Hutus between April 7 and July 4, 1994.

PICTURES: KEVIN RITCHIE

to slash the size of the peacekeeping Unamir force to 270 Ghanaian volunteers.

The bigger story was South Africa and our own elections less than six days away. A week after Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as South Africa's first democratic president, the UN met again to authorise Unamir II, with a concomitant troop deployment of 5500 men, but they would take a month to deploy, by which time it would be too late – and Kagame's troops would have all but routed the Hutu government.

In 100 days more than a million people had been slain. They weren't only Tutsis, many of them were moderate Hutus. Their stories live on in the Kigali Genocide Memorial, which provides a final dignified resting piece for the tens of thousands exhumed from open latrines into which they'd been forced, trampling each other, forcing others ever deeper, to avoid drowning in a sea of excrement, or hacked into pieces and left to rot in the forests or buried in unmarked graves. Many still lie unclaimed; nobody knows how many actually died.

Their fates beggar the imagination of even the most depraved. Some were tied to chairs and beaten, tortured until their tormentors grew bored and killed them. Others had their tendons slashed so that they couldn't run away.

Women and children were particular targets to ensure the Tutsi extermination. Rape was a precursor for many. For Hutu women in mixed marriages it was a punishment, preferably by HIV-positive genocidaires.

The memorial is both shrine and

museum. The exhibits are haunting, a melange of video footage and graphic pictures that, in the land of 1000 hills each tell 1000 words, over and over. The silent footage screams its horror: children showing off their horrific wounds. And then of course the mute echoes with South Africa; special calipers used in colonial Rwanda to determine the size of a person's nose to establish whether they would be classified Tutsi and privileged, just like the pencil test in apartheid South Africa. The identity book with the all-important racial classification in French and Flemish; dompas in everything but name, the Flemish almost identical to the Afrikaans that would spark its own conflagration in 1976.

There are 259000 people interred in the memorial; brought from all over the country to lie in mass graves that line the terrace below.

Countless families were destroyed, millions of people displaced. Dogs literally ate the rotting flesh of their owners. There was rampant lawlessness, looting and chaos. Infrastructure; schools, churches, stadiums had all been destroyed.

"The genocidaires had been more successful than anyone would have dared believe. Rwanda was dead," reads the penultimate exhibit before you move to a darkened room where family photographs of the victims hang on series racks in lit alcoves.

Today, the country is unrecognisable. It's clean, obsessively so, starting with the confiscation of all plastic bags on arrival at Kigali international airport. The roads all the way to Gisenyi on the banks of Lake Kivu in the north-west where



Another visitor browsing through the hundreds of pictures of the victims, sent in by loved ones, which hang in alcoves that fill an entire room.

the Hutu government made its last stand before fleeing into Goma next door and exile are not just beautifully surfaced; there are street lights.

There are immaculate gardens outside the district offices of every village and town, and on the last Sat-

urday of every month – at Kagame's edict – the entire country gives up its Saturday morning from 8am to 11am to clean up areas in their local cells. They then meet to discuss matters of community importance for the next month.

Known as Umuganda, it's an age-old Rwandan custom that ironically underpinned the efficiency and speed of the genocide 22 years before. Kagame has harnessed it as a nation-building exercise.

Surviving the genocide means tribalism is banned – there's no mention of ethnicity on official documents. Anything that could possibly spark any ethnic division is now a criminal offence punishable (as) propagating genocide ideology.

The words "never again" resonate across the country, particularly during the commemoration at this time of the year. The slogan is Kwibuku, a Kinyirwandan term subtitled remember, unite, renew, with banners complete with corporate logos adorning businesses and government buildings the length and breadth of the country.

This year it's Kwibuku22, the number a reminder of the distance travelled since the genocide.

Rwanda is fastidious in other ways too. There is no boisterous public debate, no one agitating for the president's downfall – perhaps understandable given the media's role in fomenting the genocide. Kagame runs the country like a chief executive holding his ministers to their KPAs and pointing to the country's run of positive growth rates – albeit off a low GDP – coupled to favourable international competitive surveys as proof of the country's success.

Singapore and Lee Kuan Yew are cited as inspirations, debate is constrained around "the national interest", the country is sold internationally as the Switzerland of Africa, the subtext of the dark con-

tinents is obvious.

Discussion of the genocide too is also restricted. For the past 18 months it has been referred to strictly as a genocide against Tutsis, ignoring the reality that tens of thousands of Hutus were slain too, the other self censorship is the number – international agencies estimate the number of casualties between 500000 and a million, in Rwanda the number is always stated as more than a million, with some experts privately conceding the number could be in excess of 2million, but to admit that would be to admit that Hutus were also victims – a heresy worthy of public shaming as a genocide denialist.

Equally, the hundreds of thousands who perished in the DRC when Kagame's soldiers went in to unseat the kleptocrat Mobutu Sese Seko and then Hutu rebels in the refugee camps is airbrushed too.

Critics claim Kagame is a dictator; government officials claim no one understands Rwanda's context, that the government of national unity makes sure everyone has a seat at the table from deputy president to Speaker of the house, all of which must be from opposition parties, even up to half the seats on the cabinet – even if the ruling party won 80% of the poll.

Kagame uses his support to push for a third seven-year term in office, changing the constitution because his administration delivers.

Back at the genocide memorial, there's a room upstairs. It's open, light and airy. There are no exhibits, only chairs. A sign on the door jamb proclaims it to be the counselling room.

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