

The Genocide against the Tutsi started before 1994 - says convict

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On knees is a sister to the standing Genocide convict. She begs for forgiveness for her brother's horrors that she did not for many years /Rwanda Correction Service

Shiny iron roofs dot a massive lowland in the southwest of Eastern Province. A short distance away from Bugesera district offices, in Mayange Sector, a young lady rides her mother on a bicycle to shop for breakfast.

She is headed to Mbyo, a small trading centre on the main road to Nemba border with Burundi.

Mbyo, like all parts of the present-day Bugesera district, is one of those places where the Genocide against the Tutsi happened on a large scale, because it was a large concentration of the Tutsi population in the period before the Genocide.

There is something more peculiar about the place though; this is one of the few places where genocide perpetrators and survivors, murderers and victims live in one "Reconciliation Village."

On Wednesday, November 27, a local organisation working with Rwanda Correction Service (RCS) held a meeting at which perpetrators who are currently in

prison met survivors whose loved ones they killed, to seek forgiveness.



All attentive, the crowds in their hundreds gathered at this centre to hear stories from unhandcuffed Genocide convicts, all men, all in the orange uniform that is worn by convicts under the country's correctional system.

One could hear murmurs vanishing in thin air when a stout man in a white taqiya (Muslim cap), in his late 40s, stepped out of the line of other convicts, to narrate his atrocities and seek forgiveness.

The man is called Ayub Ngayaberura, and starts his testimony by saying that the Genocide did not start in 1994 as it is widely believed.

He remains stoic and with a straight face, he recalls "a death that no one or nothing deserves" he committed in 1992.

A man identified as Rukara was a neighbour to then youthful Ngayaberura. Particularly, he was the father of Ngayaberura's classmate, Louise, and who was a father figure to him, who always gave him yellow bananas.

As Ngayaberura narrated, two of Rukara's children - Louise Uwamungu and her brother, George Karega - stand next to him.

Uwamungu, who is expecting, is in her 30s. She stood stoutly but you could see the sorrow in her tired, wet eyes and looked at the ground for most of the time.

But she took a swift step forward when she realized that her father's killer was avoiding some details by saying "We killed him really badly with bludgeons."

She sank the audience in melancholy when she revealed that her father did not die to the hittings of bludgeons.

"When they left, my father regained consciousness," recalled Uwamungu. "They all came back late, put a rope around his neck and dragged him across town asking people that; 'Pay us so we can rid you of this garbage.'"

They eventually threw him in a pit latrine.

"Would you forgive me," Ngayaberura then prayed for three times, "I would be glad and my heart would be free. Forgive me, forgive me, forgive me."

In front of the frozen public, Uwamungu said she had forgiven her father's killer mainly because he had previously taken the step to show them the pit latrine where the remains of her father were.

The confession and apologizing platform brings together perpetrators, their families and survivors whose loved ones they killed.

However, much as it was all good between Ngayaberura and the two siblings whose father he had killed hugged, it was not entirely over.

Following the grueling account, Florence Mukandayisaba, the 27-year-old sister to Ngayaberura fell on her knees before the two siblings to recount her own story.

"For many years, I brought him [Ngayaberura, her brother] food in prison ignorant of his deeds. He had refused to tell me."

Mukandayisaba never felt the unseen burden she carried whenever she would pass by Uwamungu who is her neighbour.

"When my brother finally told me the truth, I could feel stains of blood all over myself, I was so ashamed."

Ngayaberura is one of the 150 Genocide convicts who willfully choose to confess their crimes and seek forgiveness from their victims' families, as part of the journey towards unity and reconciliation.

As part of the effort to foster reconciliation and cohesion among perpetrators and survivors of the Genocide, government through partners like Prison Fellowship International has set programs such as reconciliation villages intended to resolidify families from both sides of history.

In those villages, both perpetrators' and victims' families live and work together through cooperatives. Prison Fellowship has established eight such communities and brought together 150 pairs of such families.



To the executive secretary of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission, Fidele Ndayisaba, "confessions are key both for reconciliation and locating victims' remains" that are still scattered all over the country so that they get a decent burial.