

Country of a thousand horrors

Annie Thomas

AFP, December 15, 1994

KIGALI, Dec 15 (AFP) - Rwanda, country of a thousand hills, became the country of a thousand horrors in 1994.

A civil war which had sputtered for three years between the ruling Hutus and the minority Tutsis reached a flashpoint on April 6, when unidentified assailants shot down a plane carrying Rwandan president Juvenal Habyarimana and Burundi president Cyprien Ntaryamira, killing them both.

That triggered massacres in Rwanda which horrified the world, and also destabilised neighbouring Burundi, which has a similar ethnic mix.

Now, at the end of the year, with the Tutsis victorious, Rwanda's remaining inhabitants are trying to tally the dead, the orphans, the refugees, the assassins.

Between 500,000 and one million died, out of a population of 7.5 million - men, women and small children chopped to death with machetes

or garden hoes, blown to pieces by grenades and mortars, tracked down, tortured and killed solely because of their ethnicity or political affiliation.

Several probes have established that key figures among the majority Hutus planned the systematic genocide of the Tutsis, who made up only 14 percent of the population, and also programmed the elimination of Hutu opponents.

The same investigators have denounced recent arrests, summary executions and acts of vengeance by Tutsis which have induced more than two million Hutu refugees to remain in squalid refugee camps in neighbouring countries rather than return home - ragged proof that the conflict is far from resolved.

In 1959, the Hutus overthrew their Tutsi overlords, forcing many to flee.

Thirty years later, on October 1, 1990, and again at the start of 1993, the sons of those refugees invaded northern Rwanda from Uganda as

members of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF).

The Hutu-dominated Rwandan Armed Forces repulsed them on both occasions with the aid of Zaire and France.

A peace accord was signed on August 4, 1993 at Arusha, Tanzania, which foresaw the establishment of a transitional parliament and government which would include leaders of the RPF.

By April 1994, almost nothing had been done.

The murders started a few hours after the death of the president, and soldiers killed the prime minister and several members of her cabinet.

The following day, April 7, the RPF said it was setting out to halt the massacres in the face of inaction by the world outside.

UN troops serving in the UN Assistance Mission in Rwanda, created to oversee the Arusha accords, were 2,500-strong in April, but that strength was quickly drawn down to 400 after 10 Belgian soldiers were killed.

It tried in vain to obtain a cease-fire for some three months while the world remained paralysed.

France, accused of arming the Habyarimana regime, launched a humanitarian mission code-named "Operation Turquoise" at the end of June and established a security zone in the southwest.

The French troops saved Tutsis from being massacred, and also saved Hutus by preventing the RPF from entering the zone.

The RPF meanwhile took control of Kigali and chased out the government.

The defeated Hutus first fled across the eastern border into Tanzania, then a second wave – more than 800,000 – crossed the western border to the Zairean town of Goma. There, a cholera epidemic scythed through the camps, killing tens of thousands.

The international community mobilised at this point, with the United States sending troops to help out and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) arriving.

The NGOs were soon to denounce the insecurity in the camps, their control by the Interahamwe militia-men who had carried out so much of the slaughter, and the pirating of aid supplies.

Many began to question their role in supporting an army-in-waiting, and threatened to leave unless an international force was set up to provide protection and order.

The UN Security Council, which had already decided to set up a war crimes tribunal, deemed it prudent to delay on deciding on any military force.

In Kigali, a government was set up in July with five parties represented but excluding Habyarimana's Na-

tional Republican Movement for Democracy and Development.

It was also excluded from the parliament for its role in the massacres, but six army officers were designated as deputies.

The government continues to face

enormous problems, but the international aid it has sought has been slim so far, with donors setting the return of the refugees as a precondition.

at/hn/ap

AFP AFP