

# Hunted Rwandans Tell Of Courage Amid Cruelty

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**Some Hutus risked their lives to shelter neighbours, writes Chris McGreal in Gishyita**

FRENCH soldiers were no more prepared for the sight of men playing football with a young boy's head than their command was for the army of Tutsi refugees fleeing the killers at the grim match.

A soldier saw the head being kicked around as the French moved to protect a mass of Tutsis who had been hunted almost for sport through the forests and hillsides around Gishyita by their fellow Rwandans.

As France puts pressure on the United Nations to agree a "safe haven" for non-combatants in western Rwanda, the most victimised civilians are emerging from months in hiding.

The single largest group to emerge is gathered on a Gishyita hilltop. But under cover of darkness, individuals and families have crept from sheds, back rooms and toilets, with tales of weeks of terror. Some tell of brave Hutus who sheltered them at great personal risk.

The main French rescue effort has been concentrated on Gishyita. The deployment of troops was delayed by the army command's wish to believe that the root cause of the killings was rebel infiltration.

Army commanders claimed bands

of armed Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) rebels had worked their way 50 miles from the front line carrying weapons to distribute to Tutsis to use against Hutu civilians.

But it appears the French were duped by the Hutu authorities to keep troops from intervening in the continuing slaughter of innocent Tutsis.

Hundreds of Tutsis who fled into the forest more than two months ago were being hunted and murdered. The hillside is speckled with wrecked and burned Tutsi homes.

When the French finally grasped the reality, they dug in machine guns to keep armed Hutus at bay on a neighbouring hillside.

Helicopters airlifted the most seriously wounded to Zaire. First on board were the children sliced with machetes. Some were missing hands or feet. One young girl had lacerations on each leg just below the knees. Her attackers had been trying to "shorten" a Tutsi, who are generally taller than Hutus. Many were emaciated after months of scavenging in the forest.

The French are uncertain what to do with those wounded left in Rwanda. Their mission may have been billed as humanitarian, but they are ill-prepared to deal with the 500 or more Tutsis now reliant on them for survival.

An aid agency offered beans and

water, and French officers say the site is likely to serve as a gathering point and camp for Tutsis in the area. But the barefoot children in rags are exposed to biting winds whipping across the hilltop, with only rudimentary shelters to protect them and the many remaining sick and injured.

The boy's head was buried. The rest of his body was never found, but the narrow river on one side of the hill bears dozens of bloated corpses.

Silhouetted against the skyline are about a dozen watchful Hutus. They keep their weapons hidden, but French troops with night-vision goggles say guns are carried openly after dark.

Such cruelty is not universal. While the killers rampaged, and others sat passively by, some Hutus risked their lives to shelter the hunted.

About 15 miles from Gishyita, a

woman ran out to a group of French soldiers on Saturday and handed them a note. It said Hutu families had been sheltering Tutsi neighbours and they needed help.

The French returned after dark, sealing off the main road running through the village. Gradually, the Tutsis were brought out. A mother and baby peered, still shocked, from the back of a French lorry. Young girls and old men filed out, but no young men. They had all fled. Maybe some survived.

Altogether, eight adults and 17 children were rescued from their hiding places in other people's homes. The Hutus who had protected them stayed behind, while some villagers were hostile to the French, accusing them of caring more for Tutsis than Hutus.