

## Video: Of Genocide and the rebirth of Bisesero

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He is Simeon Karamaga, an elder this reporter had met earlier in April during a visit to Bisesero Genocide Memorial.

The girl is actually Karamaga's daughter who had just finished high school at the prestigious girls' science school: Maranyundo Girls School. Knowing a bit of who the old man was, I immediately asked if I could visit him at his home a few days later to which he accepted.

First forward we drove for about four hours to the foot of Karongi District en route to Bisesero Genocide Memorial.

Vilgile Nkundiye, the curator, says the memorial has two parts; one for mass graves where about 50,000 victims of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi are



Karamaga, wife and one of his children

buried, and the other depicts the story of resilience and courage of Bisesero survivors.

### Which kind of resilience?

About 500 metres away from the memorial are a few homesteads; among the residents include two brothers, Aaron Gakoko and Simeon Karamaga. They are Genocide survivors. They fought for their lives and survived and have since been regarded as the living faces of Bisesero warriors “Abasesero.”

Gakoko and Karamaga were born in a family of nine. All their siblings and parents were slaughtered during the Genocide save for one brother who had already fled to Burundi. In addition, the two brothers were married and had nine children between them; all of them perished.

“Genocide claimed all my children and wife,” the 74-year-old soft-spoken Karamaga tells *The New Times*.

He is quickly drawn into deep thoughts for a moment before he switches back on to narrate how the entire Bisesero died and rose again.

“Bisesero was literally dead. But it has revived. Indeed, Bisesero rose again,” Karamaga says, before noting that, “But God rewarded me with a new family and a better country.”

The aging face of Karamaga has two skins, one of a troubled past and another of a contented old man. But where does this come from?

Bisesero, right at the foot of Karongi District, experienced probably the unmatched level of conspiracy between the French and former Rwandan government like no other place during the Genocide.

As of May 13, 1994, slightly a month after the genocide against the Tutsi broke out in several parts of Rwanda, Bisesero was still “safe” for many Tutsis.

When systematic massacres begun in the country, Bisesero residents formed



From L-R: Gakoko's wife, Gakoko and his grandchild and Karamaga

a resistance strategy. Culturally, Abasesero were illiterate people who didn't have schools, or any paved roads that connected their area to the neighboring cities.

All they knew best was cattle rearing and that explains why most of them carried sticks and spears most of the time. They were some sort of wild warriors.

"When we heard about the killings some of our local elders including late Aminadabu Birara (Gakoko and Karamaga's elder cousin) ordered us to take strategic cover on top of that hill (points to the hill across) where we could spot them (killers) from the top," 65-year-old Gakoko interrupts his brother to narrate.

But how did they lose the battle?

At the top of Muyira hill, Abasesero carried stones, sticks, spears for defense should the "enemy" attack them.

"They (Interahamwe militia) would come from this hill while we watched in hiding. The moment they would get close to us we would rise up at once and attack them with stones and somehow managed to mix ourselves among them and they wouldn't shoot. That's how we managed to fight them back," Karamaga adds.

"Sticks and stones can be good weapons. They helped us a lot," Gakoko interrupts his elder brother again.

"They (Interahamwe backed by genocidal government forces) were armed with guns and grenades. That's how they managed to kill a lot of our people at ago," Gakoko says.

On May 13, Karamaga says, Interahamwe established that Bisesero residents were prepared to fight back and the militia "sought reinforcement" from the neighboring military bases. At that time, several Tutsi from the neighbouring area had endured the steep walk to take refuge in the resistant Bisesero.

"We were about 4,000 people gathered on top of Muyira Hill with stones

and spears ready to defend ourselves,” Karamaga recalls.

“A moment later we saw big guns that we had never seen before and big numbers of Interahamwe and ex-Far forces.”

That’s when heavy artillery and many soldiers, including Hutu civilians, were deployed in Bisesero to finish off the residents. At the same time, the Bisesero Tutsi were aware they had been attacked; anyone who tried to go up to the top of the hill was stopped with stones and spears in defence.

“They eliminated all women and children. . . no woman survived during that time of Genocide, none of our women and children survived,” Karamaga says.

Opération Turquoise, a French-led military operation in Rwanda in 1994 arrived around June 13, Karamaga says.

“When we learned that the French had arrived, we came out of hiding and stood by the roadside. They asked us how we were and we were like; “we are dead, can’t you see?”

“We went ahead to show them the bodies of those who had been killed and they told us to keep courage and that they would return a few days later. As soon as they had left, Interahamwe returned and killed most of us who had survived,” he adds.

Karamaga, Gakoko and a handful of other Bisesero Tutsi fought on and survived.