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KEEPING THEIR FAITH IN A LAND GOD FORGOT

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KIGALI, Rwanda Blood has been scrubbed off the pews and now singing fills the chapels. Bible peddlers have set up tables in front of bullet-pocked church entrances.

The Kigali priest who wore a pistol on his hip fled to France. Other priests are in refugee camps or prison awaiting war crime trials.

Before the killings of as many as 1-million people last year, the Roman Catholic Church's following in Rwanda - 62 percent in a 1991 census - was higher than in any other African country.

Six months later, worshippers again crowd the capital's street on their way to church every Sunday.

But many Rwandans refuse to return to the sanctuaries where tens of thousands of people seeking refuge were hacked to death. They say church leaders betrayed them by allying with the Hutu government that organized the extermination of the minority Tutsis.

The divisions in the church hierarchy ran as deep as those in Rwandan society itself. Interahamwe death squads killed scores of priests and nuns for being Tutsis or Tutsi sympathizers. At the same time, say genocide investigators and the new government, some Hutu clergy members cooperated with the killers in disemboweling a country.

The result is an institution in shambles and a faith ravaged.

""Before the genocide many people believed in God, but now they say those men who preached are killers," said Emmanuel Rutsindintwarane, a Tutsi priest who escaped to neighboring Burundi during the war.

""The bishops and archbishop did nothing to stop the killing. They could have stopped it. But they didn't speak out."

Some Tutsis paid government soldiers hundreds of dollars to escort them to churches when the war started. Then those same soldiers helped turn the churches into slaughterhouses. At first they used lists to pick their victims. Then they set out to massacre everyone hiding in chapels and parish buildings.

""Every day the people went to church, but when the genocide began they took machetes to kill other Christians," said Joseph Kalisa, a 49-year-old Tutsi.

""I lost my conviction in the church. I will pray at home."

In the Rwandan countryside, massive parishes perched on hilltops are often the only brick buildings in sight. The church's presence has been political since European missionaries brought Catholicism here 100 years ago.

As collaborators with Belgian colonizers, missionaries reinforced the dominance of the Tutsi minority by denying Hutus access to schools. More recently, church leaders united with Hutu President Juveneal Habyarimana, who took power in a 1973 coup and ruled until he died in the April plane crash that set off the genocide.

Archbishop Vincent Nsengiyumva, a Hutu and close friend of Habyarimana, was a member of the ruling party's central committee from 1975 until 1990, when Pope John Paul II forced him to resign. During that time he helped promote regime supporters into the church's top ranks.

""Politics is stronger than religion here," said Tutsi priest Didas Ruzindana. ""The archbishop was more of a politician than a man of the church."

Priests, nuns among first victims

To the dismay of rank-and-file priests, church leaders remained silent about the Habyarimana regime's human rights

violations, including the killings of hundreds of Tutsis and political opponents since the Rwandan Patriotic Front invaded in 1990.

Priests who had condemned the government's use of ethnic quotas in education and the civil service were among the first victims in last year's massacres. In all, 105 priests and 120 nuns - at least a quarter of the clergy - are believed to have died. Some were Hutus protecting Tutsis.

In June, Tutsi soldiers of the victorious RPF murdered the archbishop, four other bishops and eight priests.

Other Hutu church officials fled the country and fear they, too, will be killed if they return. In August, 29 Hutu priests in Goma, Zaire, wrote a letter to the pope. They demand that the new Tutsi-dominated government drop its plans for war crime tribunals and that the old military, which carried out the genocide, be incorporated into a national army.

"We dare even to confirm that the number of Hutu civilians killed by the army of the RPF exceeds by far the Tutsi victims of the ethnic trouble," they wrote. International observers call the claim ridiculous.

Evidence some priests were killers

Alain Sigg of the United Nations Center for Human Rights said investigators have "strong evidence" that about a dozen priests actually killed. Others are accused of supervising gangs of young killers. The new government has imprisoned at least two priests and two nuns for alleged collaboration in massacres.

Rwandans who hid at St. Famille in Kigali during the genocide said the priest in charge, Wenceslas **Munyeshyaka**, carried a pistol, traveled under the protection of government militias and helped identify Tutsis to be killed.

He denied the last allegation in a December letter he sent from France to Otto Mayer, a German missionary.

"People who have had relatives killed - the sorrow and the suffering brings them to accuse without reflecting too much," Mayer said in defense of his friend.

The new government is openly hostile toward the church. RPF soldiers tell orphans that priests summoned their parents to the churches to be killed, said Mayer.

Still Mayer, who sheltered 500 Tutsis in his parish for two months and shows the scars on his right arm from a grenade attack, laments: "The church was not independent enough and lacked in its prophetic mission."

Now priests travel around Rwanda to conduct services in the churches of dead colleagues. Many preach forgiveness for the killers to help heal a severed nation.

"I want to forgive. If I don't, I'll be forced to revenge. Then I'll be like them," said Christine Kanyamibwa, 34, after attending a Sunday Mass in Kigali. She said her husband was killed after a priest refused to hide him.

Octave Ugirashebuta, a Tutsi priest at Christus Center in Kigali, fears the church has been so tarnished that it can never regain moral authority.

Standing outside the blood-spattered parish room where Habyarimana's soldiers murdered seven priests and eight nuns the day after the plane crash, he said he opposes replacing killed clergy members now.

"We don't need an archbishop. In the past, bishops did not help. We don't want to rush to replace people. The whole church has to suffer for this."

Other priests have suggested that, in addition to facing trials, killers should be forced to confess in front of church congregations or be excommunicated.

Rwanda's new leaders won't let people forget what happened.

In Ntarama, about 30 miles south of Kigali, two men guard a church. Past the skulls lined up in the tall grass outside, through the holes in the brick walls where soldiers threw in grenades, there is a snapshot of terror. Hundreds of bones draped in soggy clothes are scattered among the wooden pews.

The government insists they be left as a reminder.