

Nyange, where survivors still struggle to come to terms with carnage at church

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For 23 years, the Vatican maintained its silence despite prominent members of the Roman Catholic Church being convicted for their role in the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi. But last month, Pope Francis opened a new chapter by expressing remorse. So what ?



Nyange Genocide Memorial site is being constructed at the same spot where a church that was razed on Tutsi on the orders of Fr Seromba, stood. / Eugene Kwibuka

At the premises of Nyange Parish in

Ngororero District, Western Province, two construction projects are going on ; a modern church and the Nyange Genocide Memorial site.

The church is the new parish of the Roman Catholic while the memorial is being built by the Government.

The space where Nyange Genocide Memorial site is being constructed used to be a church but it was razed down by a bulldozer driver acting on direct orders of Fr Athanase Seromba to kill Tutsi who had sought sanctuary in the place of worship.

The latter had occupied the church for safety during the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi believing that the Interahamwe militia who had hounded them out of their homes wouldn't dare attacking them at the sacred place.

Far from that, Fr Seromba, who was living at the parish during the Genocide, connived with the then local officials and commandeered a civil works bulldozer to fast-track the slaughter on April 16, 1994, after earlier attempts to burn the church using fuel had failed.

The memorial site in Nyange is in memory of over 3,000 people killed at the church notoriously destroyed by Seromba, who is now serving a life sentence in a prison in Benin.

The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda handed him the sentence but survivors in Nyange will never forget his cruelty.

The Catholic Church that he was representing in the area stands accused of playing a key part in the Genocide as a result of actions by its clerics like Seromba and others in different parts of the country.

“That politicians in the genocidal regime and members of the Catholic clergy worked together to demolish the church on people speaks volume about their cruelty. I don’t know if I can call Seromba a priest because how can a man of God demolish a church on his own congregation?” said 61-year-old Aloys Rwamasirabo.

Rwamasirabo, who lost five children in the rubble when the church was razed, ironically remains a staunch Catholic and prays from a nearby makeshift structure, a few metres from the scene.

Besides Nyange, Nyamata, Ntarama and Nyarubuye are among the other churches where hundreds of thousands of Tutsi were killed and have since become memorial sites.

Survivors have welcomed the recent admission by Pope Francis of the Church’s mistakes in the slaughter but call for the Vatican’s involvement in post-Genocide reparation.

“I think the Church should pay reparation for people who were killed by its clerics. Seromba was found guilty beyond reasonable doubt by ICTR and we should now be able to sue for damages”, Rwamasirabo said, hin-

ting that one day he may file a case in court seeking reparation.

Another Genocide survivor in Nyange, Innocent Kamanzi, agrees with the idea of getting the Church to pay some form of reparation because its role in helping to deal with consequences of the Genocide is far from enough.

“The Church should admit its role in the Genocide as an institution and work with the Government to provide reparations to help in the reconstruction process. The Church didn’t send Fr Seromba to kill people but it didn’t do anything to stop him either”, Kamanzi said.

He urged the Church to reach out to survivors and provide support to them such as channelling money through the Government’s Genocide survivors fund, FARG, among other efforts.

He also urged clerics to cooperate in providing information about tracking down suspects of the Genocide among members of its clergy, some of whom are still serving in different parts of the world.

“What’s their role in pursuing members of their clergy, in helping with investigations and pursuing the suspects? They know where they are and they should help in tracking them down,” Kamanzi said.

Ray of hope

For over two decades after the end of the Genocide, the Catholic Church’s silence about its role in the slaughter was considered an insult by many survivors and other Rwandans who even interpreted it as denial

of Genocide itself.

But that rancour was somehow appeased by Pope Francis's words when he met President Paul Kagame at the Apostolic Palace in Vatican City last month.

After meeting the President, the Pope issued a statement in which he begged for God's forgiveness for the failings of the Church and its members who participated in the Genocide.

"He implored anew God's forgiveness for the sins and failings of the Church and its members, among whom priests, and religious men and women who succumbed to hatred and violence, betraying their own evangelical mission", the Vatican said in a statement after the meeting.

The Pope's move is crucial for building a common ground between Genocide survivors and the Catholic Church in Rwanda so that the latter can be more involved in dealing with genocide consequences, says Ibuka president Jean-Pierre Dusingizemungu.

"We want the Church to participate more in the rehabilitation of Genocide survivors be-

cause it hasn't been doing much in this area", he told The New Times last month.

Dusingizemungu said the Church's silence over its role in the Genocide was *"stopping a lot of things"* when it came to talks about how the Church can contribute.

"Now that the Pope has unlocked that knot (broken the silence) it may help in our negotiations with the Catholic Church. It's an important move that we should be happy about and it will put a nice face to the Church and we could see it more involved in productive work in the future", he said.

Regarding the call for the church to pay reparation to genocide survivors, Dusingizemungu said that a study is ongoing about setting up a trust fund to help survivors through which the Catholic Church can be encouraged to channel its help.

Details about the trust fund have not yet been made public but the Ibuka head said the scheme could be set up before the end of the year.