

# Bystanders & Upstanders: 1994 Genocide in Rwanda

**Many people believe that not getting involved or being a bystander, is a neutral act. However, a bystander never helps the victim; by not intervening, they actually give the perpetrator permission to go ahead.**

The Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre examines the role of bystanders during the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda to understand the consequences of their choices.

As early as January 1994, **Romeo Dallaire**, who served as force commander of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR), warned the UN that trouble was brewing in Rwanda and asked for support. The UN Security Council discussed the issue, but no decision was made. When the killings started on the 7th of April, he again requested additional support, but the response was to greatly reduce his existing force. Even the Organization of African Unity (OAU), did not condemn the killings.

During the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, the **international community** failed to intervene. This includes South Africa and the international media who were distracted by South Africa's first democratic election in 1994 and the events surrounding it. This failure is borne out by the various responses from leaders around the world, including former U.S. president **Bill Clinton**, who apologised in 1998 for not declaring the events that took place in Rwanda a genocide earlier. He considers this to be the biggest regret of his presidency. **Kofi Anan**, Secretary-General of the UN (1997-2006) expressed remorse and acknowledged that the lack of support to Rwanda during the 1994 genocide, was a systematic failure of the UN. In 2000, six years after the genocide ended, Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt took responsibility for country's part in the conflict.

The role of the **Roman Catholic Church**, which was the biggest church in Rwanda and had close ties to the government, is particularly disappointing. Before the genocide, the church was thought of as a place of refuge and sanctuary where the militias would not dare to enter. But in 1994, this was not the case. Sylvestre Sendacyeye, a survivor, tells how officials encouraged them to find shelter in the churches. He and many others were brutally attacked there, and he was left for dead. Barely alive, Sylvestre managed to escape and run to a Catholic sister from Germany, **Milgitha Kosser**, who ran a medical centre and she bribed the militia not to kill him.

**Sister Helene Nayituliki**, a Catholic nun, recalls an incident which occurred while she was trying to save some Tutsi by transporting them in the back of a truck dressed in school uniforms. At a roadblock they were all ordered by the Interahamwe, Hutu extremist militia groups, to leave the truck. She told the Tutsi not to show their ID documents, which would identify them as Tutsi, and promised the militia to return the next day with bribe money. She was

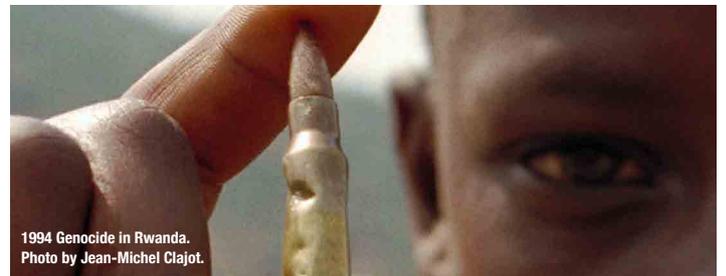
able to protect, and ultimately save them even though she was badly abused by the militia men when they returned.

These are two examples of members of the Catholic church who, at a time when many churches were sites of mass murder, chose to be upstanders and saved many Tutsi in their private capacity. In 2017, **Pope Francis** apologised for the role that the church had played, admitting that some Catholic nuns and priests had been involved in the killings, but there has been no official apology from the Roman Catholic Church to date.

**Radio RTLM** (Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines), a popular media outlet, was used extensively to incite killings. Hateful statements were often broadcasted which dehumanized Tutsi, calling them "snakes and cockroaches" and even listed names of those that should be killed. As late as the 2nd of July, four days before the end of the genocide, Radio RTLM was still encouraging Hutu to kill Tutsi.

After the genocide, there was another choice to make – how to move forward as a nation? **Fatuma Ndingiza**, Executive Secretary of the National Unity & Reconciliation Commission of Rwanda (2002-2009), explains that there could not be a land for perpetrators and a land for victims. In order to move forward and live together, Rwandans had to choose reconciliation.

RENE POZNIAK



1994 Genocide in Rwanda.  
Photo by Jean-Michel Clajot.

## REFLECTION:

When looking at the choices discussed in part 1 and 2 that were made during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, it is critical to keep two points in mind:

1. Choosing to kill Tutsi at this time was not a crime. It was the law.
2. Choosing to be an upstander or rescuer, represents humanity's capacity for amazing courage at a time of great risk.

Should the international community, the Church as an institution and the international media be judged as perpetrators and held responsible for the choices they made during the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda? Or should they be seen as bystanders? What were the consequences of their inaction?