

Death by Design

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Planning for the Apocalypse

BYUMBA, Rwanda (AP) – They were trained, armed and programmed to explode, a human doomsday device designed to detonate on command.

The extremist Hutu militias responsible for many of the 200,000 deaths in Rwanda were forged more than a year ago as a chilling final solution to ancient ethnic animosities and modern political pressures, former government officials say.

These secret civilian armies - which the government purportedly claimed at one point were being trained as park rangers - were the creation of Hutu President Juvenal Habyarimana, who continued to arm them even as he negotiated peace with his Tutsi-dominated enemies.

When he died in a mysterious plane crash on April 6, his murder machine thundered to terrifying life in every corner of this crowded little country, killing minority Tutsis and Hutus deemed opponents of the government.

The switch has yet to be shut off.

"We warned the international community that this was happening, that these people were being trained and armed to kill great numbers of people," said former Finance Minister Marc Rugenera, one of the Social Democrats Habyarimana had been pressured to include in his Cabinet.

Holly Burkhalter, Washington director of Human Rights Watch, said it was well known that the massacres were carried out by people "armed and trained by the Rwandan army." She said the army training had gone on "for a couple of years and there were many, many reports that it was very organized."

The Rwanda massacres came at a time when post-Cold War pressures for multiparty democracy collided horribly with ingrained ethnic animosities and internal power struggles.

The majority Hutus were traditionally farmers whose dominance by the tall cattle herders known as the

Tutsi - also known as the Watutsi - dates back centuries.

Belgium, which took control of the country after World War I, favored the Tutsis with better educations and jobs for 40 years, fanning the fires of the 1959 Hutu revolt that toppled the Tutsi government and led to bloody reprisals against the minority.

In 1990, Tutsi exiles led a well-equipped rebel army into the country from Uganda.

Many of them had become high-ranking soldiers in the army of former Ugandan dictator Idi Amin and the guerrilla army that put current Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni in power.

Habyarimana, a Hutu hardliner, came under international pressure to make peace with the rebels and open his government to opposition parties.

After bitter negotiations, Habyarimana gave 10 Cabinet posts to opposition parties in April 1992 and three months later opened talks with the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front in Arusha, Tanzania.

The 34 months of negotiations were disrupted by repeated broken cease-fires, sporadic fighting, threats and acrimonious meetings, but ultimately resulted in a power-sharing agreement.

But the last year also marked the recruitment, training and arming of extremist Hutus from virtually every village, Rugenera said.

During one breakdown in peace talks in Arusha a year ago, Rugenera said opposition figures got an inkling of what was to come from a comment made by Col. Theoneste Bagosora of the elite presidential guard, which reputedly ignited the massacres.

"He said he was going back to Kigali to prepare for the apocalypse," Rugenera said.

There were numerous other threats by Hutu hardliners that Tutsis would be killed and float back to their ethnic homeland via the Kagera River, a warning borne out by the bodies that now fill Rwanda's waterways.

Opposition figures said they complained nearly a year ago that Hutu extremists were being trained at secret sites at the Kagera National Park in the northeast and the town of Gisenyi near the Zairean border.

Rugenera said at one point the government said the militias were learning to be park rangers.

"We knew something would happen. But we didn't know the day or the scope," said Joseph Nsengimana, 43, a member of the governing board of the opposition Liberal Party.

"Habyarimana said repeatedly that if the RPF were to take power, they would find their families dead."

Sporadic killings of Tutsis by terror groups broke out in mid-1993 and escalated in early 1994, including a massacre of hundreds in January.

Rwandans will debate for generations whether or how Habyarimana intended to use the militias had he lived. Rugenera believes they would have been used to disrupt multiparty elections or bring havoc if the opposition won an election or the rebels won the war.

Opposition parties and the rebels deny shooting down or blowing up the plane carrying Habyarimana, and contend that he was instead killed by his own people to thwart the Arusha accord he had signed.

"Habyarimana was caught in his own trap," contended Denis Polisi, a rebel spokesman. "He had to keep arming his militias and he had to accept democratic reforms, but he couldn't do both."

But while the rebels and opposition leaders say they had no reason to kill Habyarimana, they also paradoxically cite the militias as proof that he had no intention of honoring the power-sharing accord with the RPF.

Whoever killed him, his death plunged Rwanda into one of history's most incomprehensible series of massacres.

"The presidential guard began it when they went to kill the (opposition party) government ministers," Rugenera said. "First they killed their kids and wives."

Rugenera is a Hutu member of the Social Democrats and not affiliated with the Tutsi-dominated rebels. He

was one of the few ministers who lived in his own house, rather than an official residence, and said he managed to escape to the home of a German neighbor.

He fled Kigali, taking advantage of the chaos when the rebels moved close to the city.

Militias, many of them operating in their own villages, pulled out their lists of names of Tutsis and anti-government Hutus and began separating women, men and children and killing them with guns, grenades, special knobby clubs, machetes, spears, bows and arrows and at least one sharpened umbrella.

"It was a plan of genocide that had been prepared a long time," said Polisi. "We warned the embassies, the (Roman Catholic) church, the EC (European Community) months before, but nobody listened."

Nsengimana, 43, a former university art professor, said he had a routine meeting with an RPF official inside the parliament building in Kigali when Habyarimana died. He said he was trapped inside while massacres erupted, followed by fighting between the approaching rebels and regular army soldiers.

"In the morning we were informed that important persons had been killed," he said. "I called my wife and she said her brother had been killed with all of his family."

Rebels took the parliament build-

ding and Nsengimana was escorted to Byumba, the rebel-held town north of Kigali where most of the opposition ministers now live.

Nsengimana said he is still waiting for word on his wife and children, who were at home.

"I asked the RPF to look at my home. It was empty. When they went to the house next door, it was filled with cadavers," he said, his face twisting into tears. "I have asked them to look again."

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