

Testimony on the Resistance on Bisesero

Name: Efesto Habiyambere

Cellule: Bisesero

Sector: Rwankuba

Commune: Gisovu

Préfecture: Kibuye

Profession: Farmer

Marital Status: Widower of the genocide

Age: 28 years old

The people from the Bisesero region came from various tribes but we were united. I am from the *Umunyiginya* tribe and my wife, Nyirankumbuye, was from the *Umuhima* tribe. We had two children, one boy and one girl.

There were many young girls and boys in Bisesero. They would gather on the hill during the day and play sport. They also played when they were looking after the cows. None of the Tutsis from Bisesero studied. Their occupation was looking after the cows. Some of the young people wanted to join the FAR (*Forces Armées Rwandaises*). They had passed all the relevant exams, for example running etc, but the military officers had prevented them from joining, the reason being that the Abasesero were Tutsis. They were very slender and were apparently unable to handle a gun. So we remained isolated in our region, and no-one could attack us.

After President Habyarimana's death, Tutsi houses were burned down in the commune of Gishyita in Mubuga. The Tutsi intellectuals were the first to be killed. On the 9 April 1994, the militiamen from this commune launched an attack on the sector of Musenyi, in the Bisesero region. These militiamen were accompanied by military soldiers who were carrying guns. We managed to resist this attack by throwing stones at them. Despite the fact that we were returning their attack, they still managed to kill several people from our group.

As soon as this happened, we gathered together on the hill. People were starting to panic. They couldn't eat from fear. Me and other young people like Nzigira (from the *Umunyiginya* tribe), Gatwaza (from the *Umuhima* tribe) and Habimana (from the *Umuhima* tribe) went up to the other young people who were afraid and tried to raise their spirits. Two old people, called Karamaga et Birara were giving encouragement to prepare the people for battle against the militiamen. The children and women started to look for stones to collect. We put them in our bags. For the first few days, everyone warmed themselves at night by the fire. Often, however, it rained and the people shivered in the cold.

The militiamen launched attacks every day. They arrived in Obed Ruzindana's cars which were in fact trucks used to transport tea from Gisovu. When they arrived they were singing. They were wearing white clothes and grass on their heads. When I saw them attacking, I would immediately take my spear and club and put the bag of stones around my neck and I would ask the others to follow me. Nzigira would take another group and we would follow the orders that the two old men gave us.

When the militiamen attacked, we would lie down at first. This was because they were throwing grenades. Afterwards, we would mingle with the attackers and fight. When they saw that about two militiamen were dead, they would immediately retreat. Someone would be looking to see if the stones were all gone and then they would ask the women and children to quickly get more. If anyone from our group retreated out of fear, Birara or Karamaga would immediately hit them with their clubs.

In the evening, when the militiamen had gone home, we would gather together again so that those who were still alive should know to carry on fighting until the very end. When my mother was still alive, she used to come and beg me not to go at the front of the others when a battle took place. She wanted to prevent me from doing this because I was the only boy in a family of girls. I was the only son she had. For the first time she was afraid that I would die. Not once did I listen to my mother's advice. I always went to the front. During the whole of the month of April, we were attacked but each time we were the victorious ones because we managed to kill many militiamen, police and soldiers. We also took their weapons, such as guns.

Two weeks prior to 13 May 1994, there was a moment of respite. We thought that peace had been reestablished and we started to farm our fields and to bury the dead.

On the 13 May 1994, at about 9:00 a.m., we saw a large number of cars arriving, such as lorries, buses and trucks. They were full of militiamen. When they arrived at a spot near to where we had gathered, they surrounded us and began to shoot us using different guns. In less than an hour, they had killed practically all the women and children.

There was no longer any point in throwing stones now. We had to create a path amongst the militiamen so as to avoid being caught. Our men all attacked one particular group of militiamen who were consequently frightened and they opened up the path for us. We ran to hide in the bush. That day, they managed to break all the crockery and any other materials we had.

The next day, they came back to comb through everything. We could no longer see any grass. Instead, we saw corpses; women with children on their backs who were dead. The genocidal killers had undressed the bodies! It was a terrible sight.

As I was walking at night, I fell over my mother's body. I asked the survivors to help me bury her. I don't know where the bodies of my children and the other members of my family are exposed.

The militiamen continued their attacks although there were not as many of them as there were during the attack of 13 May 1994. Despite there being only a small group of us left, now that practically all the people were dead, we carried on fighting. Nzigira gave us much courage but unfortunately he was killed.

Nzigira and I were in an attack together, the day he was killed. The militiamen were throwing stones and saying 'These are the people who are preventing us from receiving our reward from Obed Ruzindana. We have to find a way to kill them.' Nzigira was then hit on the foot with a stone. He began to limp. I helped him withdraw because I could see that it was impossible to carry on the fight. As we were walking back, a soldier saw us and shot at us. Nzigira was hit and he fell. The militiamen came to finish him off with a machete. I was shot in the knee but I was still able to walk. I went and hid in a bush. The militiamen who saw me going to the bush, set light to it to kill me. I escaped from the smoke and went to hide elsewhere.

I remained in Bisesero, with all the bodies around me. I couldn't find anything to eat or drink. I was very thin and my hair was dirty. My skin was all scaly because I had not been able to wash myself for two months.

However, I was still alive when the French soldiers arrived to drive us to the RPF zone in Gitarama. When the genocide was over, I came back to the commune of Gisovu with another group of survivors. We inhabited the centre of Gakuta near the office of the commune. We were really poor there and many people were ill. The Hutus, who we had known before, would walk passed us, look at us and make fun of us. They asked themselves if we were really the powerful Abasesero who were so well-

reputed. When we heard what people were saying, we decided to go back to our hill. Three survivors got together and built a small house.

Now we live on our hill. We are just widowers who can't farm. We no longer have any cows to be able to drink milk. I am still young but I do not have the means to do business for example and I have not done any studies to be able to find myself a job. Before the genocide there were houses and cows around us; now there are only bushes.

When the genocide was over, I was happy because I saw that there were no more Tutsis being killed with machetes. Now survivors are again being killed with machetes.

We are always being asked on the radio and in meetings to be reconciled with the Hutu militiamen. I wonder how we can find the right moment to go and visit the militiamen so that we can all be reconciled. There are many of us who are disabled and cannot walk. At night, we stay in the bush because otherwise the militiamen can find us in our houses to kill us. Because of this, we can no longer sleep. During the day, we do not do anything because we are too weak and our spirits are so low. People should know that we do not have time to be reconciled with militiamen who killed our wives, mothers and children and who carry on killing us. They tell us that the prisons are full and that there is not enough room for the other militiamen who should be imprisoned. We do not have room in our hearts for reconciliation. Our hearts are full of sadness and sorrow.

Interviewed in Gitaburo, 9 February 1997.