

Rwanda Rebels' Victory Attributed to Discipline

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After nearly four years of intermittent war, Rwanda's Tutsi-dominated rebel front has routed the larger Hutu-controlled Rwandan Army through a combination of perseverance, superior tactics and a big edge in motivation and discipline.

« The rebels were both better led and better trained, » said Frank Smyth, author of « Arming Rwanda : The Arms Trade and Human Rights Abuses in the Rwandan War, » a report by Human Rights Watch released in January 1994. « They were a more highly motivated and disciplined force. It's surprising to me that the army held out as long as it did. They felt they were fighting for their lives. The Presidential Guard were good killers. But overall this was a classic despot army. »

Although combat casualties were small compared with the slaughter of 200,000 to 500,000 Tutsi civilians by Hutu military and militia units, the war between the Rwandan Patriotic Front and the Government was vicious, and often involved modern weapons. In the battle for the capital, Kigali, each side pounded the other with heavy mortars, recoilless cannons and howitzers.

The two sides had been involved in an arms race since 1990 after the rebels' unsuccessful invasion of Rwanda from bases in Uganda. The rebels won

some territory in the north, but failed to go farther because of insufficient training or arms, and also because the French Government sent in paratroopers and advisers to bolster the Rwandan Government.

Rebels' Combat Experience

The Rwandan Army was rapidly increased from 5,000 soldiers to about 30,000, Mr. Smyth said. Additional thousands of Hutu were trained as militiamen by the ruling party of President Juvenal Habyarimana. But Mr. Smyth said that aside from some elite units, most of the soldiers and militiamen were undisciplined, and that drinking and rape were condoned by their officers.

The rebel forces, whose top officers had combat experience fighting in the rebellion that installed Yoweri Museveni as President of Uganda in 1986, also grew to about 15,000 men and women. The source of the rebels' arsenal is less clear : they have insisted that their weapons were either stolen from the Ugandan military, won in battle or bought on the open market with money donated from Tutsi who had emigrated from the region.

Mr. Smyth said the rebels told him they had long-range Katyusha rocket launchers, mortars, recoilless canons

and land mines, in addition to small arms.

When President Habyarimana died in a suspicious plane crash on April 6 and mass killings by Hutu militia began, the rebel forces swung into action and moved to the outskirts of Kigali, ending a cease-fire that took effect in December. But it took nearly three months for the rebels to capture the capital.

Militias Were Main Target

Rebel officials have always insisted that the capture of Kigali was never their immediate goal, and Mr. Smyth believes rebel tacticians felt that if they captured Kigali too soon, their troops risked being encircled and bogged down.

« I think the R.P.F.'s primary goal was to target the militias more than

the army, » said Mr. Smyth. « Those were the ones doing the killing. »

Rebel tactics involved first sweeping through the eastern sector of the country and slowly choking off the capital. By the time they captured Kigali airport in late May, Government forces were already highly demoralized and many were fleeing.

Mr. Smyth says he believes capturing the airport was the most astute move of the war. The rebels, he said, were concerned that Western governments, in particular the French, would send in troops and try to boost the rump Hutu Government.

When the French sent in soldiers on a humanitarian mission in June, the rebels denied them landing rights and they were forced to enter overland through Zaire into western Rwanda.

« Once the R.P.F. had the airport, they'd won the war, » said Mr. Smyth.