

Kwibuka

Sebiroro narrates Bisesero massacres; bravery and forgiveness

James Karuhanga

The New Times, March 10, 2019

Antoine Sebiroro was 20 at the height of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi when more than 50,000 people, including his relatives, friends and neighbours, were massacred in the Bisesero region of Western Rwanda.

Early this week, he narrated the sadness and tragedy of what happened – a story of how blood flowed through the hills – 25 years ago.

The father of eight met this reporter, before a late afternoon downpour, at the Bisesero Genocide Memorial, perched atop a hill a few kilometres away from the main highway, in Rwankuba Sector, Karongi District.

Dotted with hills and valleys, Bisesero is well-known as the place where the Tutsi refused to be killed but defended themselves for days on end against machete wielding Interahamwe militia and government troops.

Sebiroro recalls that trouble started in the early 1990s when hundreds of Tutsi, including his father, were rounded up and imprisoned. The government suspected them to be collaborators of the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) rebels.

When the Genocide started the Tutsi in the larger Bisesero area took refuge on Muyira hill.

Sebiroro said : “We knew what happened in areas such as Gishyita where the Tutsi were slaughtered. A man called Birara then told us how we were supposed to defend ourselves using spears and stones. We gathered lots of stones and whenever they [interahamwe militia and government troops] came shooting at us we would keep low and wait. Once they got closer, around 50 meters or so, we hurled stones at them.”

“When they got so close we mixed with them so

that they couldn’t be able to shoot us. We could then use sticks, spears, and any other tools to fight. We always repelled them but after such a battle we lost people. Even so, we were feared.”

From April to around May, 1994, he recalled, they fought fearlessly and even captured not less than 18 rifles from the Interahamwe.

“But most of these guns had no bullets. And, even those that had any bullets, none of us knew how to fire a gun.”

After suffering heavy defeats the attackers withdrew. The equally weary Tutsi perhaps thought that it was over. But they were wrong.

Two weeks later, the attackers returned in larger numbers and far better armed; and with police and military reinforcements from neighbouring Gishyita and Gisovu Communes as well as others from places such as Cyangugu and Gisenyi.

Yussuf Munyakazi, Sebiroro recalled, then a wealthy farmer mobilised interahamwe from other neighbouring areas who circled Bisesero.

“All over a sudden we found our area surrounded by very many people. All hills around us were surrounded. There were people in huge numbers.”

Before this massive attack the Tutsi had tried to carry on with their normal lives. They were trying to adjust after the turmoil, returning to their farms as they tried to plant crops to avert a possible famine.

When they were attacked, they tried to flee but were repulsed and hundreds hacked to death in every direction they turned.

“We tried to run towards Karongi but bullets rained on us and we turned. We went towards Kagari but after the strongest amongst us had crossed, the



Antoine Sebiroro

attackers halted and encircled women, children, and the elderly and hacked to death. Blood flew as if it was a fast river. The hill was full of dead bodies.”

“Late in the evening when the attackers left, we returned to Muyira only to find so many dead people. There were babies who were suckling from dead mothers. Dead bodies were everywhere and we were too tired to talk. Many were wounded. And we were so hungry. The attackers looted our area, vandalized everything and took our animals.”

The next day, Sebiroro said, many people were miserable, and suicidal.

“Some of us decided that we should go and drown

in Lake Kivu but when we headed there, the attackers cut us off from that direction too. They intercepted and killed many people that day.”

No Tutsi ever tried to leave the area and succeed. So they gave up and waited for their certain fate, death. There was never anywhere to hide.

About 50,000 and 60,000 people died in Bisesero, Sebiroro said. The survivors are not more than 1,300, he added.

At the time, a few miles away, in Gitarama, a battle raged as the RPF advanced on the falling genocidal regime. But the refugees could not reach the rebel zone as they were cut off by the killers.

In around June 1994, he recalls, a jeep of French troops arrived in the area. The Tutsi implored the French to save them.

“The French troops were accompanied by Jean Baptiste Twagirayezu, a teacher in our primary school who had turned into a pitiless murderer. I heard him [Twagirayezu] tell the French troops that we were liars; that it was not the Tutsi who were threatened but the Hutu who were being killed.”

“All they did was tell us that they were not properly equipped. They said they needed to go back and come back with reinforcements and sufficient weapons.”

The French soldiers promised to return after three days, but during those three days, Sebiroro said, hundreds of people were killed, day and night. Before then, he explained, “the killers only ‘worked’ during day but for those three days, ‘work’ [killing] was done night and day.”

After the third day, when the French returned to the area, in a convoy, none bothered to stop and offer help. They passed through the hills and continued to Nyungwe. On their way back, later, the frantic refugees again pleaded for help.

This is when the French took them to Kagari hill, Sebiroro said, a place which “looked like a graveyard” as many Tutsi had been massacred there.

“It is the only time I saw a French soldier cry. Then they airlifted the wounded amongst us to Goma. In Goma, they striped us naked and gave us see-through polythene material to wear. We were made to sleep under the beds of wounded government soldiers.”

The survivors later fled from the French encampment in Goma to a nearby UNHCR compound, in Gitwe. Later, they relocated to Bugesera District before returning home in 1995.

In his immediate family, only three siblings including him survived the massacres.

In 1999, he got married. It was in a bid, he said, to escape loneliness, bond with someone and move on with life.

Today, Sebiroro continues to reside in a small house built for him by the government in 1997. The small three-bed room structure now needs an overhaul but he does not have enough money, he said. He remains optimistic since other more deprived survivors' families in the area have been given new homes.

"The government made an effort to help us but now the houses are old. These are houses which were constructed poorly and in haste, back then as the situation was horrible."

His first child, a 19-year-old son, is in senior five. Sebiroro hopes his son will enroll in a mechanical TVET school soon so that he can start earning and support the family.

Looking back, and in the future, despite all their past pain and suffering, Sebiroro said, the Biseseo survivors pardoned people who killed their loved ones. And, most importantly, they urge the country's youth to learn from the country's dark past so as to avoid Genocide in their lifetime.