

From Rwanda

10th October 1999

During the years between 1959-1963, internally displaced Rwandese - call them Tutsis - were packed into lorries and herded into the country's marshlands and tsetse-fly infested forests in the western provinces towards Tanzania. We had no medicine and buried an average of eight people each week from a number of ailments. A popular pass-time was "detonating" or "assassinating" lice in the hair, and girls whose nails detonated lice more loudly were the most eligible in the village. Another type of outing was to visit the best removers of jiggers, because some people did not excel in "de-mining" them whole, and you could end-up with tetanus and death. I hope you had a chance to look at my toes during your visit to Nairobi.

Worse humiliation, my dear friend, came when hunger started to bite, after the Red Cross stopped their rations. We devised a way of bartering firewood for food, and this meant walking for 10 miles and more each day with a 30-kilogram load through villages in our district to put some food on the table. Donor fatigue soon developed among the local populace, which made us walk even further and longer. In any case, with every refugee scrapping for firewood, environmental impacts soon set in and the forests became a desert. I always try not to remember what followed, what happened to those tall, noble Tutsis and our beautiful mothers and sisters during those long days of deprivation. As for me, diabetes struck maybe earlier that it could have affected me. Inside the camps, where entire families were crammed in one open room for everybody, stories circulated, rumors did the rounds and children could not help hearing what their parents were doing, their grandpas and grannies, or even the neighbors in the next grass-thatched house. It did not matter how careful they were; hunger-induced sleeplessness always amplified the mutual consolations. One hitherto respected elder was said to have stolen food from the cooking-pot and had trouble swallowing it because of hot pepper. He quickly sought refuge in bed, covering himself with a blanket. "Don't uncover me, I have malaria" he told his wife who sought to know what the matter was. That famine of April 1961 was called "Do not uncover me! or, in Kinyarwanda "Ntunyorosore." Humiliation was universal.

On 18 December 1963, following a desperate attempt by some Rwandese exiles from camps in Burundi to come back home, the government army, with the help of the Belgians and Congolese armies, foiled the invasion.

On 23 December, hundreds of Tutsis were rounded-up and shot (on 24 December), probably to deter any other thought of attacking Rwanda. My father was in the fourth of seven lorries which trucked the tutsis of Kibungo to Rusumo forest for executions, at a place we called "Golgatha." The day before, shortly after I turned 13, I had been arrested and ordered held until my father - who could not be traced - turned up. But when he eventually did, they did not release me. I was driven to Rusumo in the prefect's car to witness the execution, in cold blood, of the 224 tutsi men. I run through the dense forest, crossed into Tanzania 96 hours later, and was rescued by a Canadian priest; father Maurice Boissinat who was hunting in the region of Bushangaro Parish, Karagwe. I did not see my country again until 30 years later, but when I returned, a sense of humiliation overwhelmed me again. The man charged with organizing and supervising those acts of genocide in December 1963, was alive and well, loudly condemning the same, was even chairman of the ruling party in the new government. That is politics for the good of the majority, but deep humiliation for me.

Cases of humiliations and mental torture come in many ways. In July of 1994, just after the genocide in Rwanda, I took leave to go and see if anybody from my family had survived. Well, no one had, except my younger brother who had been away. Dodging the dogs and vultures which had gone wild feeding on bodies, I managed - with the help of the 34 survivors of my village which had 8,300 people before the holocaust - to bury 23 of my main and larger family. I wiped my tears, said a prayer, and came back to my modest United Nations job in Nairobi. One week later, it hit me. I could not eat, sleep, work or even think. Massive depression saw me put on Prozac, and people - including my sweet and loving family - could tell something was amiss - I could not concentrate on work anymore.

After some seven months under treatment, I wrote to my supervisor to tell her how I felt. I requested to be granted one or two years unpaid leave to re-organize and find myself. I believe this lady, usually well-disposed towards her staff, happened to harbor some ambitions of advancement at that particular time and a game of cards in the manning table of her section could produce results. She did not humiliate me just by refusing my request, she remarked that she was nowhere near Rwanda during the genocide and had nothing to do with my problems. One month later, the UN offered a plan for early separation and I quit. She is now in Geneva, and in my prayers.

Now, about politics and humiliation. Imagine a situation where you have those hardships, at home, in the camps, from one country to another, then one day you stop to reflect. Your compatriots in exile have felt the same way, everywhere they are on earth, and they decide to go home, by any means at their disposal. You will contribute, in your own way, ready even to give your life, because thirty-four years in exile is a long time. However, when the time comes, the decisive moment, you miss the bus. Maybe you did not hear the whistle, you have talked or had a drink with a wrong person, racist tendencies also do exist in marital or other affiliations, but somehow you will be left on the wayside. You may try to catch the next train, then you will have to live with muted voices, voices like: That is him, that the one, oh! So it is you, et cetera, ad infinitum. One thing you will never know is what they mean by: That is the One. In the end, dear friend, you will realize you are a fool. Who are you rushing to see? They are all dead. The only tie left is your name, and your language, and the resentment for the people who humiliated you. And you remain in exile, this time by choice. Because in exile, that is where you have the only other ones who carry your name.

Footnote or after-thought:

Through my life-long tribulations, I grew-up believing everything bad happened only in Africa: wars, famines, disease and poverty. Then I saw atrocities in Chechnya, in Yugoslavia and Kosovo. Humiliation was everywhere, hunger and thirst. This started me thinking: Maybe Africa is getting out of it, and other parts of the world are starting to go under. There were even African peace-keepers in the above countries! I do not believe there are any solutions, as long as the world turns and is populated by people with different cultures, varying degrees of wealth and intelligence even military strength.