

Interview with Claude Gatebuke



On April 6, 1994, Hutu extremists shot down the plane carrying Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana and Burundi President Cyprien Ntaryamira, killing everyone on board. On April 7, the systematic campaign to eliminate Tutsi and moderate Hutu began in earnest. In just 100 days, 800,000 people were slaughtered. Claude Gatebuke, a Tutsi, was fourteen during the genocide. Remarkably, he and his family survived and later moved to the United States where Claude now maintains an active public speaking schedule, working with other activists to make America an international leader in mass atrocity prevention. Claude was kind enough to reflect on the genocide he survived twenty years ago, opening our eyes to what it means to be a target, and challenging us to stand with potential victims, present and future.

You were 14 during the genocide. Prior to the beginning of the systematic killing in April 1994, what was life like in Rwanda? How apparent were the extremist attitudes that orchestrated and fueled the genocide?

I remember two Rwandas prior to the genocide. One was the Rwanda up until I was 10 years old that was known as the Switzerland of Africa. Very peaceful and safe. I was totally oblivious to the fact that there were even different ethnic groups in Rwanda. Everyone lived together, spoke the same language, and practiced the same religious and cultural customs. I saw a change when in 1990, a group of exiled Tutsi soldiers invaded Rwanda from Uganda with the help of the Ugandan military. The group was known as the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and it's currently the ruling party in Rwanda since 1994.

When the war started, tensions started building up from 1990 to 1994. The government in place was predominantly Hutu and the rebels were predominantly Tutsis. During the war of the early 90s, the RPF Tutsi rebels committed massive atrocities that left many families homeless, thousands of people buried in mass graves and thousands amputated. The rebels' methods of killing included calling people to meetings and bombing and shooting into crowds and fishing off survivors with hand weapons. By the end of 1993, the city where I lived was host to over 1 million people fleeing the rebels. Many were amputated and just about every single one of them was destitute, lone survivor, or had a horror story to tell about their survival. This version of Rwanda was also characterized by riots in the city of Kigali as well as multiple politicians' assassinations that led to subsequent massacres. By April 6, 1994, Rwanda was like a balloon waiting to explode. There was general

insecurity, and one never knew if she/he would make it home any time she/he left her/his house. On April 6, the Hutu president's plane was shot and violence in the country spread like wildfire.

When did you first realize you were in danger—you and your family were a target?

When it was announced that the president was shot, my family and I, as most Rwandans in the country, understood that our lives were in instant danger. Just about every Rwandan understood this. The same night, I started hearing shelling over our heads that would whistle and then explode. It seemed like the whole city was being bombed. I knew we were in danger of being bombed. I did not realize that our family was a target by our extremist neighbors until I went out to the street and saw dead bodies piling up in the street. After we took shelter in our hiding area, we heard neighbors searching for us to kill us. This was within the first 2 days of the shooting of the president and the resumption of the war. Crazy neighbors were searching for their victims and we were part of those wanted by the militias to be killed.

For readers who may be unfamiliar with the genocide, please explain the systematic nature of the extremists' campaign.

What I witnessed was extremist Hutu militias hunting down Tutsis like animals and were seeking to exterminate every single one of them. The same militias also

killed lots of Hutus that they thought or accused of being Tutsis, collaborators of the RPF rebels, those whose property they wanted to steal, or simply didn't like.

While extremists orchestrated the genocide, common citizens participated in the killings. Why were neighbors willing to kill neighbors?

There were multiple reasons for common citizens participating willingly or unwillingly in the killings. Many were forced to kill in order to save their lives. Others killed to settle scores. There were also those who killed because they thought they had to strike first instead of being found by the RPF Tutsi rebels and exterminated like those who had been killed in zones the rebels occupied. The fear factor was a major player given the fact that the extremists ran a very strong propaganda and at the same time ordinary people found themselves being shelled by the RPF rebels and felt like the RPF was coming to kill them. Because the RPF was made by a group of Tutsis who would stop at nothing to seize power, ordinary people took the RPF to represent all Tutsis. This was totally wrong as the RPF has to this day proven to be a menace to all ethnicities in Rwanda.

Worth noting is that the majority of survivors of genocide in Rwanda were saved by their neighbors who put their lives on the line and saved lives. In some cases such as mine, it was not only neighbors but also strangers that I would not even recognize today if I ran into them. But in one way or another, they helped me survive.

You were abducted by soldiers twice. Your sister was infected with cholera because your family's only source of water was a lake full of dead bodies. You were separated from your family without food, transportation or any other kind of support. At one juncture, you were handed a shovel and instructed to dig your own grave. Did you ever want to give up? What kept you going? How did you find the will to survive?

I would not attribute any of my survival to my will to survive or anything I did to make it out alive. I survived because many people, some of whom I know always showed up and intervened in one way or another. It is as though every time I wanted to give up, another person showed up and helped me survive.

What went through your mind, what were you feeling, as you stood there with a shovel, convinced you would be buried in the hole you were about to dig?

I was shaking as if I stood in a sub-zero degree weather even though the weather in Rwanda seldom falls below 70 degrees. My stomach bubbled and I thought about my sisters and my father who would never know what happened to my mother and I. My stomach bubbled and after a while, I became numb and accepted my fate. I just wasn't sure which kind of weapon was going to finish us off but I could guess it would be a machete, clubs and if we were lucky, a gunshot.

You are a person of faith. How has the genocide shaped your religious views?

Is God the same for you pre- and post-genocide?

Pre-genocide, I was too young to process the miracles God produces. Now looking back, I realize that everyone that came along to help me survive was a Godsend. In that respect, I strive not to let God down by being a bystander to genocide or mass atrocities. I am much more appreciative of the blessings God has showered me with before, during and after the genocide.

During the genocide, did you hope Americans (and the West) would intervene? How would you grade America's response?

I absolutely hoped Americans, the West, other African countries, ANYONE, or even one extremely strong weather storm would stop the madness in Rwanda. Any amount of intervention would have saved a lot of lives. Unfortunately, no one stepped up and a million lives were lost. Even if one person out of that million was saved, it would have been worth it as long as the intervention didn't add to the number of victims. I am generally opposed to military intervention and prefer economic sanctions and other measures to keep countries in check. But in some extreme cases, military intervention may be necessary. Needless to say, I was hoping that someone would intervene and save innocent lives.

What lessons should the world learn from the Rwandan genocide?

The lessons for the Rwandan genocide should be that “never again” must no longer be a slogan to be repeated in colorful speeches after massacres but should be a motto to live by instead. Genocide and mass atrocities are preventable crimes. They at least shouldn’t take as many lives as they have in the past and are doing in countries where genocide and mass atrocities are taking place. It’s a crime that should be prevented and a fast response should be put in place whenever genocide or mass atrocities occur. The other lesson should be that all perpetrators should be treated the same. They should face justice for crimes they committed. All victims should be also be recognized regardless of whether they are part of the group being targeted.