

Rwandan genocide lest we forget...



*As South Africans celebrated their freedom in April 1994, close to one million Rwandan's were massacred as a result of ethnic tensions between the two main groupings in Rwanda. In commemorating the tenth anniversary of the genocide, the **Labour Bulletin** reviews a book titled 'A Sunday at the pool in Kigali,' by French Canadian Gil Courtemanche, which provides an account of the premeditated genocide, and asks how it was allowed to happen while the world stood by.*

'In the middle of Kigali there is a swimming pool surrounded by deckchairs and a score of tables all made of white plastic. And forming a huge L overhanging this patch of blue stand the Hotel des Mille-Collines, with its habitual clientele of international experts and aid workers, middle-class Rwandans, screwed up or melancholy expatriates of various origins, and prostitutes. All around the pool and hotel in lascivious disorder lies the part of the city that matters, that makes the decisions, that steals, kills and lives very nicely, thank you. The French Cultural Centre, the UNICEF offices, the Ministry of Information, the embassies, the president's palace

(recognisable by the tanks on guard), the craft shops popular with departing visitors where one can unload surplus black market currency, the radio station, the World Bank offices, the archbishop's palace. Encircling this artificial paradise are the obligatory symbols of decolonisation... Small red houses – just far enough away from the swimming pool not to offend the nostrils of the important – filled with shouting, happy children, with men and women dying of AIDS and malaria, thousands of small households that know nothing of the pool around which others plan their lives and, more importantly, their predictable deaths.'

This opening paragraph provides some indication of the political dynamics against which the genocide was planned and executed in Rwanda. *A Sunday at the pool in Kigali* (capital of Rwanda) refers to the poolside at the Hotel des Mille-Collines where the different sections of Rwandan society used to gather before the genocide whether they were government officials, the foreign aid community, soldiers, foreign diplomats, the media and or prostitutes. It is against this setting that a French Canadian film maker Bernard Valcourt (in Rwanda to make a documentary on HIV/AIDS and those 'heroic, pious transgressors' who were prepared to do something) meets and falls in love with Gentille, a waitress who worked at the hotel.

The story of Gentile is the story of Rwanda and the legacy left behind by its former colonisers, the Belgians. Rwanda (like Burundi which was also a colony of Belgium) has two main ethnic groups, the Hutus, the majority and the Tutsis who represented about 15% of the population. (In Burundi it was the Tutsis in the majority and the Hutus in the minority).

Gentile's great, great grandfather (Kawa) was born a Hutu at the time when Rwanda was first part of a German colony and then became a colony of Belgium's together with



Burundi and the Congo. Kawa had great aspirations for his children. However, these were nearly thwarted when his son read about the characteristics of the Hutus and Tutsis from a book written at the time by a Belgian specialist in indigenous cultures. 'In his country he was considered a great Africanist. The Belgian king, queen, minister, high and low civil servants all learned everything they knew of the mysterious continent from this book.' And what did this book reveal? It revealed Gentile's eventual destruction and that of her great, great grandfather's vision for his children. This great Belgian specialist explained the different characteristics of the Hutus and Tutsis:

'The Hutu, a poor farmer, is short and squat and has the nose characteristic of the Negroid races. He is good-natured but naive, coarse and unintelligent. The Hutu is deceitful and lazy and quick to take offence. He is a typical negro.'

'The Tutsi, a nomadic cattle grazier, is tall and slender. His skin is light brown on account of his northern origins. He is intelligent and skilful at

trade. He has a sparkling wit and a pleasant disposition. Colonial administrators in Ruanda-Urundi would do well to obtain the assistance of Tutsis for tasks which in their judgement they may entrust without danger to natives.'

It was reading this that led Kawa to make a decision to ensure that his children became Tutsis so that they

would have opportunities in life. Gentile and her relatives, however, bore the brunt of this decision when the genocide against Tutsis began. However much Gentile insisted that she was a Hutu no

one believed her because she had become the embodiment of what her great, great grandfather had wanted – she looked like a Tutsi. Gentile is but one example of the thousands of Rwandans who tried to become Tutsis because they learnt from 'whites that the Tutsis were superior to the Hutus.' This however, created huge divisions within families and when the genocide took place it led to so-called Tutsis being killed by their Hutu family members.

Gentile and Valcourt's love affair unfolds as tension mounts in Kigali and talk of genocide increases. They face harassment together with their friends. Through the eyes of Valcourt, the book highlights some of this harassment, the start of the violent killings and raping of Tutsis and those seen to be sympathetic to Tutsis. At the same time he talks about the mobilisation of young men who were trained by the Rwandan National Movement for Democracy (RNMD). Officially these youth belonged to the youth movement (Is this not similar to reports of such developments taking place in Zimbabwe?).

As developments became clear, with massacres already beginning to take place in various parts of the country, Valcourt attempted numerous approaches to his own embassy and the UN to intervene, but to no avail. The Canadian general Valcourt approached said: 'I do not have the necessary number of troops to intervene. They will not give them to me. We will protect the UN buildings and personnel... For the rest, that's a problem between Rwandans.' In the meantime the Rwandan army was being trained by French military instructors and Valcourt argued that 'the UN did not need reinforcements, just a bold leader on the spot. All the Western military experts knew it, and in particular the UN general.'

The genocide was precipitated by the assassination of the Rwandan president at the time (a similar development had occurred some time earlier in Burundi). Those planning the assassination (referred to in the book as Zero networks) and the subsequent killings not only of Tutsis (who were referred to as cockroaches) but activist priests, human rights activist, journalists and the like had begun to finalise their plans by 6 April 1994. By the next day the majority of white expatriates were evacuated from Rwanda and the killings began.' That day in its major international bulletin CNN spent 20 seconds on the recurrence of ethnic problems in Rwanda, giving assurances, however, that foreign nationals were safe. Yes the foreign nationals were safe but many embassy staff, who were locals, attempted to take refuge on embassy property and were abandoned by their former employers and subsequently massacred within hours of the evacuation of the diplomats and their families. This review cannot by any stretch of the imagination begin to



recount the horror of the events which transpired. A glimpse is obtained in this book and the numerous other books that have been written on Rwanda.

This book is not only about the genocide but about attitudes around HIV/AIDS. As one character states: 'We have come to the end of time, eaten away by two cancers, hatred and AIDS.' Some of the attitudes revealed, which were prevalent at the time in Rwanda, seem no different to those which have emerged in South Africa ten years down the line. For example, at one point in the book there is reference to the fact that the Rwanda government was denying its own statistics. At the time, it was estimated that one-third of adults in the capital were HIV positive. 'Those stricken with AIDS were living in infamy, shame, concealment and delusion. Only a few people were trying to face up to the disaster and paradoxically, they were parish priests and nuns.'

There was even speculation in the book that President Juvenal (the president assassinated prior to the start of the genocide) might have contracted HIV from his secretary whose husband had died from the disease whilst he was having an affair with her. There was a sense amongst some of the key personalities in the book, certainly amongst those that died from AIDS, that they would rather die that way than 'be hacked up by a machete or shredded by a grenade. That's the fact waiting all Tutsis. We have to leave or die before the Holocaust.'

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book review

The hatred continues...

A key message which emerged from the tenth anniversary commemoration of the genocide was the need for South Africans to learn from Rwanda and guard against discrimination, exclusion and ethnic chauvinism, as one academic argued. The *Labour Bulletin* interviewed a Burundi refugee, now living in SA, who was in Rwanda a week before the genocide started. Alain Badin talks about that time and the hatred foreigners like himself face on a daily basis living in SA. Badin is a true product of the Great Lakes region. He was born in the Congo but grew up in Burundi. He says the future stability of the region lies in peace first being achieved in Congo. In the absence of that, he is doubtful that he will ever be able to return and live in Burundi. He says the conflict in Rwanda and Burundi had the origins in the same ethnic tensions – between Hutus and Tutsis. The only difference, he says, is that in Burundi the Tutsis were the majority as opposed to being the minority in Rwanda. He says tension began to emerge in the region ahead of the three countries (Congo, Burundi and Rwanda) obtaining their independence from 1960 onwards. Violence began in Rwanda from around 1959 onwards and many Tutsis fled to Burundi. When violence erupted in Burundi in the late 1960s, many Hutus fled to Rwanda. This

violence led to about 350 000 Hutus being killed in Burundi in the early 1970s.

Badin says the tensions have their origins in the way in which Belgium ruled the three countries. They used divide and rule tactics, with the Tutsis being advanced at the expense of the Hutus.

Talking about his time in Rwanda ahead of the genocide, he says, there was a general feeling in Kigali (and other parts of the country) that 'something was in the air. We saw it in people's faces. There was an atmosphere of fear.' He saw the roadblocks which had become a phenomenon in the build-up to 7 April. During one encounter with soldiers at a roadblock, he was told not to stay longer in Rwanda. Once he had heard that the president had been assassinated, he knew that Rwanda would explode.' The international community in Rwanda knew they were sitting on a time bomb,' he said.

Badin now lives in SA after having escaped the killings which continued in Burundi even after the genocide in Rwanda had ended three months after it began. He says however, that everywhere it is the same situation, 'I am a foreigner here, and I now belong nowhere. People do not understand the hatred we meet here in SA because we are foreigners. Our fellow black South Africans are the first people to discriminate against us.'

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