



The real hero of Ho

When we arrived at the Chicago Hilton to meet Paul Rusesabagina, he told us we were standing in one of the best hotels in the world. And he should know, he's stayed at thousands of them all over the world and used to be manager of the now-famous Hotel des Mille Collines in Kigali, Rwanda, the swanky real-life hotel-turned-shelter depicted in the critically acclaimed film *Hotel Rwanda*.

Rusesabagina was in the U.S. to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom for his efforts to preserve life in the midst of the genocide of Tutsis in Rwanda, and has spent the last few years of his life touring the world to tell his story.

In 1994 decades of ethnic tension, political turmoil, and violence in Rwanda erupted into 100 horrific days of bloodshed, leaving an estimated 800,000 dead. Rusesabagina risked his life to save 1,200 others, providing them safe haven in the Hotel des Mille Collines while Hutu militias rampaged outside.

United Nations peacekeeping forces actually withdrew in the midst of the genocide, leaving Rwandans at the mercy of the lawless Rwandan armed forces and rabid Hutu militias until Tutsi rebels retook the capital. Many international leaders have since apologized for their inaction.

A similar war is taking place in the Darfur region of Sudan today, but Rusesabagina says the international community is again turning a blind eye.



tel Rwanda

The editors interview Paul Rusesabagina

This spring is the 12th anniversary of the genocide in Rwanda. What is the situation there now?

It is a shame that as human beings we see things happen and we never learn the lessons of the past. In Rwanda, as we say, we have changed the dancers, but the music is the same. Now the Tutsis are in power instead of the Hutus, and it is the same discrimination all over again, only the other way around.

How does a culture recover from an experience like genocide? How do you achieve reconciliation?

Reconciliation has not yet started. You can never pretend to reconcile before justice is done. Justice comes before everything.

There are 100,000 prisoners in Rwandan jails from the genocide, and since 1994 we have only tried 5,000. Then there are those who have been released from prison because they have admitted their guilt. They are released by the government and turned over to *gacaca*.

Gacaca means “justice on the grass,” and it is the traditional way of trial and conviction. The community gathers under a tree, and the elders make a decision. But that is a system made in the hills by people who have not gone to school; they do not know the law. The people they used to try were just peasants who had, for instance, stolen a goat from a neighbor. In that case, they could say to the man, “Bring back the goat, and as a fine give him two.” Now, are those the people who are really trained to deal with such a case as genocide? I don’t think so.

Those who do not admit guilt are forced to stay in prison. And most of the leaders of the genocide still have never been caught. Many are now in other parts of the world. So how can we go to the genocide survivors and tell them to reconcile? Reconcile with whom? Justice needs to be done. After doing justice, then the leaders of the country can bring Hutus and Tutsis around the table to negotiate.

What needs to happen for justice to be done?

The government needs to have trials for all of the

accused and find out who is guilty, who is innocent. People are growing old in the prisons. How many years will it take to try them all? Innocent people and criminals will die in jail.

Actually, it’s as if the government has taken those prisoners as hostages, because whoever raises a voice and says people should not live in prison forever is said to be a sympathizer to the genocide. But if you want to heal you have to talk about it and come up with solutions. One hundred thousand prisoners isn’t acceptable.

Why do you think that people in the United States, in the West, did not do anything to stop the genocide in Rwanda in 1994?

There are so many reasons. One is that Africa is Africa, and it seems so very far away. Another reason is that Rwanda has no oil. If we had a little bit of oil, I am sure the international community would have done much more than it did.

The United Nations could have acted if they had officially recognized the Rwandan genocide as genocide. They did not do this until after the massacre was over. The way this gets decided is on a consensus basis. They call people, they sit down, they discuss. But at the end of the day, the week, the month, there is no decision. And by the time a decision comes, it is diluted because of political or economic interests. So it was for us, and so it is for Darfur.

The U.N. also has a problem in defining their peacekeeping mission. First of all, they have no soldiers. If and when they do come to a decision that it is genocide, then they have to start begging countries to get soldiers, soldiers from 20 different countries, speaking 20 different languages—people who never trained together, who do not know each other. And most of the soldiers are from the poorest countries in the world. The most powerful nations do not want to get involved.

Another problem: The peacekeepers are not supposed to fight. They are not supposed to defend even the victims. So why are they there? Just to stand by and

watch? As long as the U.N. itself is not reformed, they will never get anywhere.

Is this the same problem going on in Darfur?

The Darfur issue is quite similar. When Tutsi rebels invaded Rwanda in 1990, they killed civilians, destroyed villages, schools. They invited men for meetings—those men were killed, never found. They started taking young boys for military training. People started fleeing the areas occupied by the rebels. At one time we had 1.5 million refugees surrounding Kigali, the capital, coming to beg in the daytime, sleeping out in the streets without food, without shelter,

without water, without schools, without any hope for the future.

When I went to Darfur I saw that 2 million people were displaced within Darfur and 3,000 villages had been destroyed by government helicopter bombardments, just exactly like Rwanda in 1993. There is a militia, the *Janjawid*, just like *Interahamwe* in Rwanda. The militia is armed by the government, killing the people fleeing the villages. Sometimes they even go into the village and poison the well, so that the people fleeing can never return.

I visited many refugee camps in Darfur and saw people sleeping in the Sahara sun without food, without shelter, without water, without education for their children.

When we arrived, 2,000 children immediately gathered around us. They had a big blackboard on which they had written: “Welcome to our guests, but we need education.”

Is it a shock to you, so soon after your personal experience, to see a similar situation unfolding?

Africa is a completely forgotten continent. The whole world closes its eyes and ears, because they can’t believe it. Take Uganda. People say that Uganda is a free country that is supposed to be peaceful, but there are 1.8 million displaced people in northern

Uganda. This is a shame.

If you go to Darfur, you’ll see what is going on. If you go to Burundi, you’ll see what has been going since the early 1960s when I was a boy. In the Congo, how many millions of people have been killed? No one even knows. Estimates now say 4 million people killed since 1996. Who is killing them? The world does not know.

Did Western nations play a role in the Rwandan genocide?

Behind each and every African leader, every dictator, there is a Western super-power maneuvering everything. The West is encouraging dictatorships in Africa for their own economic reasons.

Before 1959 the colonizers saw Tutsis, who were 10 percent of the population, as the most intelligent, the most clever, even like Europeans. They told them, “You are superior. You are supposed to rule with us.” And they did for many years.

In 1959 the Tutsis were kicked out with the colonizers because they were seen as partners. The same international community that had before taken the Tutsis to be the good guys now took Hutus to be the brightest, the best. And for 35 years this was the case. Then in 1994 the West supported the rule of the Tutsis alone. In other words, the main objective of the West is always to divide. Why not call *all* the people around the table to sit down and say to us: “Why do you kill each other?”

Why is it in the best interest of the West to divide people like that?



Rusesabagina chats with Don Cheadle, the actor who portrayed him in *Hotel Rwanda*.

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A brief history of conflict in Rwanda

1918: Former German colony of Rwanda-Urundi is made a protectorate of Belgium. Territory is administered under Tutsi monarchs.

1926: Belgians introduce system of ethnic identity cards for Hutus and Tutsis.

1959: Hutus rebel. 150,000 Tutsis flee.

1961-62: Belgians withdraw. Rwanda and Burundi become separate, independent countries.

1960s: Hutus win

elections. Exiled Tutsis return periodically to rebel against government, sparking renewed massacres.

1973: Army chief of

staff, Gen. Juvenal Habyarimana, a Hutu, seizes power, sets up one-party state.

1990: Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF),

There are lots of reasons. One is just to divide and rule, to keep influence in the region. Before 1959 the Belgian government was behind the Rwandan government. Then between 1959 and '94, the French government was behind the Rwandan government. Rwanda used to be a French-speaking country. After '94, the Americans were more involved, and Rwanda is now an English-speaking country.

What do we in the West need to do?

Tell the leaders in Africa that they are not untouchable, as they pretend to be. They steal from their own countries, and it all ends up back here in the U.S. or Europe. Am I lying? All the aid money African leaders steal from their own countries is now in Manhattan, Luxembourg, Switzerland.

In 1994 the international community felt guilty and gathered funds for rehabilitation. The priority was to start training judges all over the country. Where are all those judges now?

We say in Rwanda that all the foreign aid money just circulates in the sky, it never lands in our country. It goes right back where it came from. The aid never gets to the right people.

What was the role of the churches in the Rwandan crisis? There is evidence that some priests and nuns were complicit in the genocide.

Yes, but I wouldn't say that the churches themselves were involved in the conflict; I would say that individuals, influential people, from all the churches failed in their duties and responsibilities. I

wouldn't say it was an instruction from Rome or anywhere else.

During the genocide all the churches in Rwanda were silent. And all the church leaders were silent. I have never heard the church leaders gathering to condemn the genocide. So that silence, to me, was and still is—the churches now are still quiet—complicity.

Was it just moral cowardice? Were they physically afraid to say anything?

No, I don't believe they were afraid. The Catholic archbishop of Kigali, Vincent Nsengiyumva, a Hutu, was a very influential man who was even involved in politics, connected to the leaders of Rwanda. So he was not somebody small. He could have stood up and said no.

Why was the church, over the years, not able to help the situation?

Because the church is also very involved in politics. The churches in Rwanda, and all over the world, are never independent entities. They always tend to be involved in politics in one way or another.

Did your faith play a role in your actions against the genocide? Was that part of what gave you the strength to do what you did?

I was born in a Seventh Day Adventist area. I attended a Seventh Day Adventist college, primary, and seminary school. I studied theology.

So it is possible that my faith played a role. No one who grew up in that environment can pretend it did not

influence his behavior.

How do you explain, though, that while so many other people, including our own political leadership, failed in this crisis, you managed to find the inner strength to do what you did?

Actually I did not do anything special. I just remained who I was. I listened to my conscience. I remained who I was, a hotel manager. I did not change, that's it.

And the rest of the world was just going insane around you?

Well, I was very much disappointed to see people, including the people I used to call good friends, on that very first day of the genocide, in military uniforms, with machetes, with guns. Intellectuals, prominent businessmen, all of those people you could take as gentlemen. I was disappointed.

Has your faith been shaken by what you went through?

Definitely. I used to trust people, but since the genocide I suspect each and every one. But that is my faith in human beings.

When it comes to God, I have many times asked myself, "Where was God? Why did this happen?" We used to say in Rwanda that God could move around all over the world during the day and would come to sleep in Rwanda. But after the genocide, we said that God went away and never came back.

Has God come back since?

Well, not yet to Rwanda. Not yet to Africa. **USC**

a Tutsi organization, invades Rwanda.

1990-91: Rwandan army trains civilian militias known as *Interahamwe*.

1993: Habyarimana and RPF sign peace accord. Habyarimana stalls on setting up power-sharing government. Training of militias intensifies.

April 6, 1994: Habyarimana and Burundi's president are killed when their plane is shot down. That night killing begins. In the

next 100 days, an estimated 800,000-1,000,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus are killed by Rwandan Armed Forces and *Interahamwe*.

July 1994: RPF captures Kigali. Hutu government flees, followed by tide of refugees.

source: www.pbs.org

For more info on the current crisis in Sudan, see: www.archq.org/sudan.shtml