

Rwanda: heading to a miracle or to a catastrophe?

By Almudena Toral, 11/20/2010

Sturdy and hearty, Gedeon Musabyimana, a Rwandan UNICEF water engineer educated in China, contained his discontent politely as we toured across an almost empty school in the rural district of Nyamasheke, in the Western province of Rwanda, in July of 2009. In the school patio, an orange and dusty esplanade, there was a fountain with four spouts. No pipes. Some meters away there was an unfinished water tank. Musabyimana later explained that the project, carried out by UNICEF, had been approved, paid for and signed off as completed months before by a handful of local, national and international officials. Yet nothing worked.

The country's president, Paul Kagame, a Tutsi guerrilla fighter who marched from exile in Uganda to take over the capital from the hands of Hutu-militia *genocidaires* in 1994, is proud of Rwanda being one of the least corrupt countries in the global south. Data from Transparency International backs this up.

Kagame has gone to reconstruct a country from the hell-looking ashes it was then, in 1994, into 'the Switzerland of Africa'. He has done so supported by funds steadily provided by international donors since the aftermath of the genocide in 1994. In the last 16 years, Rwanda has received a total of almost \$8 billion in aid from benefactors including the United Nations, multilateral, bilateral and private donors, according to statistics of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Kagame's authoritarianism has, until now, been over looked because of an astonishing improvement of the Rwandan economy, and also, because of an overdose of Western guilt due to its failure to intervene during the genocide.

But the at least in the past much-praised Rwandan president came under closer scrutiny during the months prior to the presidential elections on Aug. 9, when headlines around the world spread news about mounting violence, repression and lack of political and freedom of expression space in the country.

Things don't look much calmer now in the elections aftermath. Kagame won the election with more than ninety percent of the votes, but questions loom regarding his figure and the implications of his political model for the stability of both Rwanda and the region. "Whereas there has certainly been a lot of successes over the last ten years in Rwanda, in terms of long-term sustainability there are a lot of question marks," Jason Stearns, former coordinator of a United Nations Group of Experts on the Congo and a PhD candidate at Yale University, said.

In a context of increasing repression and fierce criticism of Kagame's government due to its long-term violent and resource-looting involvement in the Democratic Republic of Congo (new proofs such as the UN report about massacres in Congo have been released recently), questions can't but flourish.

Is peace, after all, sustainable? Will Rwanda continue to be one of the darlings of foreign aid? Or will more conditions be imposed on development benefactions -currently almost half of the government budget,

according to the Economist Intelligence Unit- now that more of the Rwandan leader's dirty linen has been washed in public?

Sixteen years have passed since the massacres of Tutsi and moderate Hutu by Hutu extremists, one of the worst genocides in history, but reconciliation is far from complete.

Killers live next to victims' relatives; rapists to the raped; mutilated to the mutilators. The legacy of genocide is everywhere in Rwanda -in its reconstruction, its incomplete reconciliation and its relations with the West.

Section II.

A TINY, landlocked country in the middle of the Great Lakes region in Africa, Rwanda is the antithesis of what it was in 1994. Then it was mayhem. Now it is orderly composure. Then it was noise -the one of drums; the other of raving shouts calling for the extermination of "inyenzi" (cockroaches, the nickname for Tutsis) gift-wrapped for murder. Now it is a slick form of silence; a collection of cities and villages where one feels uncomfortable speaking too loud, and where cacophonous laughs are a rarity.

The amount of change in Rwanda is not something one needs to search for; it can be seen in every-day snippets of life. In the capital, now home to almost a million people, streets are clean, noise is relatively infrequent, infrastructure constructions are abundant and walking barefoot is banned. Traffic is moderate and plastic bags are forbidden for the good of the environment. It is not rare to see peasants using cell phones in rural areas, and Internet usage is becoming common in the cities. Crime rates are surprisingly low and economic growth is steady (gross domestic product grew an average of 7.4 percent from 1999 to 2002 and has doubled since 2005, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit). Signs against corruption welcome you when entering Rwanda through any border crossing. According to the World Bank, Rwanda is the world's fastest-improving country in which to do business. And there is also a curiosity that Philip Gourevitch noted in a 2009 report in the New Yorker: Rwanda is the only country in the world in which women are a majority in Parliament.

Change in this land can be seen, touched, heard and smelled. Take Boulevard Umuganda as an example. The boulevard is a wide avenue in the heart of Kacyiru -a neighborhood in the capital, Kigali- where most of the foreign embassies and international aid organizations are.

Every morning around 7:30 a.m. Western-style SUVs pass by the avenue at good pace, impatient to deliver workers to embassies and aid organizations in this mainly bureaucrat stretch. The embassy of Egypt has clean wire crests. Rwandan children in school uniform greet *mzungus* (whites) in English, a legacy of Kagame's mandated English-language education (it was French before the genocide.) There are a few Western-looking apartment complexes with guarded gates, green gardens and white balconies. And several women with

fluorescent yellow reflective vests sweep leaves in the border of the roads and in the patch of grass between the two lanes. They barely look up while they diligently brush the pavement using wooden brooms.

Today, wage-earning people comb the roads and non-cemented opaque reddish patches of land. Sixteen years ago it was the job of dogs. Survivors of the genocide I met recalled seeing these animals everywhere eating human flesh: the almost one million corpses scattered over Rwanda's allegedly 'thousand hills'.

The roots of these still disturbing massacres and Rwandan ethnic strife can be traced back to colonial times. Rwanda was a colony of Germany, and later, of Belgium. It was composed of two main ethnic groups: Hutus and Tutsis (there was also an estimated one percent portion of Twas). The Hutus, accounting for approximately ninety percent of the population, were farmers. The Tutsis, the remaining ten percent, were herdsmen. The Hutus are stereotypically corpulent and have thick noses and lips. The Tutsis, on the contrary, are tall and thin and have noses and lips that are sharpened and bony. When the Belgians arrived, they instituted a system of national identity cards, by which the ethnic category one belonged to was clearly differentiated. Also, the Belgians chose the Tutsi minority as a close ally, and gave Tutsis both better treatment and more power.

Genocide, therefore, didn't just happen overnight and had days, years and centuries of ethnic resentment behind. Starting in 1959, when the transition to independence started, Hutu rose to power. Former Tutsi officials and their supporters were targeted, and many fled the country to neighboring Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi and Congo (then called Zaire). Rwandan refugee rebels in Uganda, as early as 1961, started launching attacks to seize power in Rwanda. As Alan J. Kuperman explains in "Provoking genocide: a revised history of the Rwandan Patriotic Front" in *Journal of Genocide Research*, after Habyarimana banned the return of Rwandan refugees in 1986, in 1987 Tutsi rebels formally established the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF, Kagame's current party in power in Rwanda). The RPF bridged the interests of two groups of exiled Tutsis in Uganda: a quasi-Marxist ideology movement (Rwanda Alliance for National Unity, RANU), composed of mainly political activists and until then a pacifist movement, and the Tutsi warriors who fought in Ugandan Army. There were several threats of invasion in the following years, including a failed invasion in 1990. Each of them provoked violent Hutu retaliation against Tutsi civilians back home. Discontent grew among the rebels. Fear of losing power grew within the Hutu regime.

Leading to the horrors in 1994, genocide ideology spread in Rwanda through radio airwaves. Radio, especially one station called Radio des Mille Collines, was one of the main tools of disseminating 'genocide fever'. With the backing and financing of France, Hutu hardliners conducted a campaign of de-humanization of Tutsis, raising a call to exterminate their neighbors. The overt goal was to wipe Tutsis off the face of the earth.

The event that unchained the massive killings was the shooting of a plane on April 6, 1994, which killed both the president of Burundi, Cyprien Ntaryamira, and the president of Rwanda, Juvénal Habyarimana.

The assassination of Habyarimana fueled Hutu extremists to begin the decimation of Tutsis and moderate Hutus, as well. Unprecedented violence spread like gunpowder.

There were drugs, banana beer, drums, hate speech; license to steal, beat, rape and kill. People took refuge in churches, thinking them safe. Neighbors murdered neighbors. Sometimes, even relatives murdered relatives. Most of the 'work' was done with machetes: slice by slice, life by life. Heads hacked in the walls. Red sand covered in redder blood. It lasted 100 days.

Section III.

NYAMATA is a somehow Texas-looking village an hour from Kigali. It looks almost like an abandoned movie set in the middle of Africa. There are very low, sometimes dun, sometimes bright-colored houses surrounding an orange dusty road. A 10-minute walk away from the bus stop in the main road that crosses the town, stands the church of Nyamata, where 10,000 were killed during the genocide. Inside, the skulls and bones and clothing rags that remained from the killings contrast with the clean garden outside, decorated with purple ribbons (the color tribute to the genocide.)

After a while, a young man dressed in a shirt with stripes and polished shoes approaches me, and, with a somber look, says: "I am going to tell you my story because you're young like I am, and because perhaps you know how to improve this dog-like world". He introduces himself as Charles, a survivor of the Nyamata killings when he was eight. Being only 23 at the time, he could well have been Methuselah -the oldest man mentioned in the Bible- because of all he had been through during and after the year everyone remembers here. The 10,000 massacred in Nyamata included his mother, his father, his sisters and his brothers. His memories speak of horrors beyond what one would imagine possible.

"Now there are no ethnic groups anymore and the national ID card doesn't list ethnicity, but that is only from the government perspective, only the government says we are neither Hutus nor Tutsis," Charles responded when I asked how the future looked. "The rest of us know and remember. The government has formed *gacaca* [village courts where local *genocidaires* -except commanders and higher ranks- are put on trial] but it doesn't give us security. In some years, they will be out of prison and I don't feel safe."

He acknowledged having to forgive, "because you have to see the same people in your same village." But he said so with a grimace, confessing reconciliation is just too hard to embrace.

"Kagame's idea of reconciliation was that he would erase ethnicity, that people who for hundreds of years have considered themselves Tutsi and people who for hundreds of years have considered themselves Hutu would forget their identity," Alan J. Kuperman, the expert on Rwanda at University of Texas, said. "That

was his plan for reconciliation and is not working, and has no chance of working. If that is the plan for reconciliation, it's a matter of time before the next genocide and the next civil war.”

In New York, two-meter-tall Ambassador to the United Nations Eugene-Richard Gasana, in contrast, said that reconciliation was “going quite well”. But he added after a pause: “It’s a process, it’s not an event. They will forgive but they will not forget.”

Genocide has left a disturbing legacy at every possible level. From 800,000 to one million people were killed in the course of three months in 1994, the equivalent of more than ten percent of the Rwandan population. Another two million people were displaced as refugees, and the Economist Intelligence Unit’s 2008 Rwanda Profile estimates that up to 200,000 Rwandans lost their lives in exile. An International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) was created under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter in Arusha, Tanzania, to bring to trial, among others, former military commanders, politicians and former senior cabinet ministers in the Interim government of Rwanda in 1994.

The sight of mutilated people is not rare in Kigali and other parts of Rwanda. Prisons are overcrowded with dark-skinned men dressed in bright, phosphorescent pink jumpsuits (those awaiting trial) and dark-skinned men dressed in bright, phosphorescent orange jumpsuits (those already tried in *gacaca*.) Many prisoners have already been released and sent back to their communities. There are hundreds of thousands of orphaned children, besides an uncounted number of children born of rapes. Pulitzer Prize winning Nigerian journalist Dele Olojede movingly portrayed the case of one of them in a 2004 piece called ‘Genocide child’.

The ‘savior’ of this nation in tatters in 1994 was a very slim man, with average-looking glasses and a trimmed, thin moustache. Trained in Yoweri Museveni’s army in Uganda, Paul Kagame led a group of RPF fighters into Rwanda during the genocide. He halted the massacres and seized control of the government in Kigali. He made certain that he had both Hutus and Tutsis in the newly formed regime (he actually had a “figurehead” Hutu president at the beginning) and argued for forgetting ethnic distinctions, reconciling and working hard for Rwanda to become a developed country, an Asian-tiger style nation by 2020 (his famous ‘2020 Vision’.)

“Kagame is super smart, he is a great tactician and he is very clever at presenting his ideas,” Scott Strauss, Associate Professor at UW-Madison who is preparing a forthcoming book called “Reconstructing Rwanda” and published in 2006 “The order of genocide: race, power and war in Rwanda”, said. The RPF, according to Strauss, has a very clear sense of its own direction, and Kagame “is a very forward-looking leader who thinks about how to plan for the future. He is one of the few visionary leaders in Africa.”

Thus far, the president has garnered remarkable accomplishments, but his picture, Stearns warns, is much more complicated than identifying him with the usual ‘good guy’ or ‘bad guy’ terms. He is, indeed, often pictured either as a hero or as an ogre. There are two contrasting realities.

“On the one hand many people think that Kagame should be given a break given where the country has come from since the genocide, and given the fact that the RPF has done a relatively good job with stability in the country, clamping down on at least petty corruption and promoting development,” Stearns says. On the other hand, however, “his progress has revved also at the same time as a limiting of space, political space, and civil liberties on the population. And his rather authoritarian model could may have been successful in promoting development in the short term but in the long term would have and bears serious risks, not just in terms of repression, but also in terms of how sustainable this political model is.”

Also clue to understand the recovery and evolution of post-genocide Rwanda, is considering Rwanda’s involvement in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which extends until today. Several sources I interviewed assured it is impossible to understand Congo without Rwanda. “In a way, Rwanda exported a number of its problems to Congo and exploited its resources for its own benefit,” Strauss says.

Rwanda had an overt military involvement in Eastern Congo from 1996 to 2002 (there was an actual army on the border), as Kagame tried to fetch the remaining Hutu *genocidaires*, who formed a militia called FDLR (Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda) and launched attacks against Tutsis both in Congo and in Rwanda. Although the issue is complicated and has many more nuances, they supported and armed different militias, including the CNDP (the militia of Nkunda, a Congolese Tutsi, and a warlord and former general in Congo’s army). In the course of ‘eliminating the security threat’ that the FDLR and their presence in Eastern Congo’s refugee camps represented for Rwanda’s newly formed government, Kagame’s troops committed deafening human rights violations. Those precisely were aired in a much controversial United Nations report published on Oct. 1 about widespread massacres committed in Congo, that “if proven by a competent court, could be characterized as crimes of genocide,” the final report reads.

Rwanda Permanent representative to the United Nations Gasana, when asked about the report, burst in a stentorian, skeptical laugh and simply said: “The UN report? You can’t call that a report, it’s rubbish papers.” In his view, the West has no moral authority to criticize Rwanda after their negligent attitude during the genocide. That’s a card, experts would later explain, played by the government way too often.

Meanwhile, Laurence Binet, Medecins Sans Frontiers Foundation researcher who investigated Congo massacres in the 1990s said she wasn’t surprised at all by the UN report findings. “At the time of the events (at least for the 1996-1997 period) MSF spoke out several times to denounce the fact that there were still at least 200,000 Rwandan refugees that were being haunted and slaughtered in the Zaire/Congo jungle by both forces from the AFDL (LD Kabila) and the RPA (Rwandan new regime army),” she said. “We also denounced loudly the fact that our teams were used to attract these refugees and then kill them, among other nice stories...”

The UN grave accusations, together with international news reports about actions of repression by his regime, have placed Kagame in a, some say, difficult spot. Kuperman said although since 2002 Kagame

doesn't have an overt military operation in Congo, "they fund, they arm and they provide personnel for forces in Eastern Congo, which control and enable the extraction of resources, which is a big, big component of Rwanda's economic success."

There is more evidence at the international community level that Kagame is not the good-hearted Democrat that Western powers thought, but there are countervailing pressures. "You have increasing criticism of Kagame in mainstream media but at the same time you have continuing guilt, you have continuing propaganda [he refers to comments such as Gasana's, as previously quoted] and you have the continuing use of Rwandan peacekeepers as a tool of leverage," Kuperman said. Rwanda is one of the main providers of peacekeepers for Darfur's mission, among others, reason why Ban Ki-Moon visited tiny Rwanda during the pre-publication period of the UN inculpatory report, to assuage and convince Kagame not to withdraw the peacekeepers.

The dynamics of the love-hate relations between Rwanda and the West are not to be overlooked. "When we turned a blind eye to atrocities committed by the RPF in Rwanda and in Congo in the mid and late 1990s I think that is directly related to the sense of guilt and to the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide," Strauss says, "that established a pattern of interaction with the Rwandan regime that persists to this day." Aid to Rwanda, for example, most experts say, is not like to decrease, because there is still this powerful feeling of Kagame being unique, able to restore a semblance of peace and to push for visionary development.

"I certainly think a lot of the blind support given to Kagame's regime was due to guilt over inaction during the genocide but also a desire to have a strong man in charge to rebuild Rwanda," Fiona Terry, author of the book "Condemned to repeat? The paradox of humanitarian action" said. "Kagame could do no wrong," she went on, "even the attacks on the refugee camps were sanctioned by the U.S. and the aftermath ignored."

Robert Mukombozi, a Rwandan investigative reporter exiled in Australia who is very critical of the regime said in an email interview with me: "The international community still needs him [Kagame], the same community that worked with Pinochet, Saddam Hussein, Castro, Taylor, Idi Amin, Mugabe, Pyong, among others, before they fell from grace. Kagame is in the strategic interest of especially the U.S. and Europe in the East African Community. He controls the door to DRC minerals and a good strategic arms market."

Section IV

It was Aug. 9, 2010, and the Amahoro Stadium (Peace Stadium) in Kigali was peached, as Kagame's supporters celebrated his victory in the presidential elections. "All I want is Paul Kagame," Cristian Munezero said via email some days after the elections that gave Kagame 93 percent of the vote. This devoutness towards the leader is not uncommon in Rwanda.

Election results were neither a surprise at home nor abroad. The three candidates challenging Kagame were not a threat to his presidency. They all are close allies of the RPF. The three opposition parties -- PS Imberakuri, Unified Democratic Forces and Democratic Green Party of Rwanda-- were banned from registering. The pre-elections period showed the ugliest face until now of one of the favorite leaders in Africa. Two of the main opposition leaders -both Hutu-, Bernard Ntaganda and Victoire Ingabire, are in prison. They are both are accused by the government of spreading division and genocide ideology.

"The environment has been very, very hostile," Frank Habineza, President of the Democratic Green Party of Rwanda, said in a telephone interview from Sudan. He went on to tell me he had felt threatened numerous times, but he didn't hesitate to point to July 14, 2010, as the worst day he remembers since he decided to lead the party.

"I was in Kigali when he was assassinated," he said, referring to Andre Kagwa Risereka, his Vice-President. "I went to Butare to identify the body." What he found was a nearly decapitated body with stab wounds on its chest. "It was a very shocking, and terrifying, way to kill a human being. It reminded us of the 1994 genocide," Habineza had written in a press release that reviewed a chronology of events, since they launched the party a year before the elections.

Besides the Democratic Green Party's Vice President, a prominent journalist was killed. The two main opposition papers in the country, Umuseso and Umuvugizi, were suspended. Former Rwandan Army Chief Faustin Kayumba Nyamwasa was shot in June in South Africa, where he was exiled. There were, unusual for a quiet, quite peaceful city, grenade attacks in Kigali.

"So we have news reports about Kagame trying to assassinate people in his army that he finds disloyal, we have news reports about Kagame arresting political opponents including the top two Hutu presidential candidates, we have news reports about Kagame shutting down the media when it criticizes him," Kuperman says, impassioned. "Anyone who ever criticized or was suspected of criticizing Kagame was killed, arrested or fled for their lives. This is non-stop for 16 years, and the only thing that changed is that now is reported in the New York Times when it never was before. Believe me, I will give you names, places. People I know who are dead now because they criticized Kagame."

The government stand regarding all of this is well illustrated by Ambassador Gasana's attitude in our recent interview in New York. He explicitly stated that they "don't care" about what the rest, and especially the West, says. When asked about human rights violations and restrictions of political space, he wonders out loud: "What can they [the West] teach us?"

He asks for less cynicism, and argues Western powers should let them design their own political space given how they failed Rwanda in 1994, how the Rwandan government managed to make the economy perform beyond expectations, and how the country's unique historical context is a case of its own. Aid, for him, is a tool with expiration date. "It should only help Rwandans help themselves."

Then, I think without realizing, he goes back to an old debate that not only refers to Rwanda, but to many dynamics of the West with the global developing south: Would we have development rather than freedom?

“You know, the human rights... the first human right is the right to life. The right to life is get food, good medical treatment, education, the basics, the fundamental,” Gasana says. “So when you start there, we can talk about other things. This is what we need to achieve, first of all. And we are very far today.”

In an ideal world, what Human Rights Watch would like to see changing, Rwanda researcher Carina Tertsakian said, is more outspoken critics to Kagame and conditions imposed on aid, especially on the aid flows that finance bodies like the High Media Council, for example, directly to blame for the closure of the newspapers. Kuperman, however, advocates for putting sanctions on Rwanda until Kagame leaves, facilitating his departure by giving him asylum somewhere and then being willing to lift sanctions if Rwanda moves towards inter-ethnic power sharing.

But in the world today, when I asked how the future looks for Rwanda, and what factors may come into play, there was no unanimous response. International experts question fervently the sustainability of Rwanda’s reconstruction model. Some of them, even, by all counts, question peace. Rwandans that I spoke to are more inclined towards the extremes: I saw either a clinging and open admiration for their leader or professed hatred (when they could speak, this is.) But the truth is that no one, Rwandan nor foreigner, rich nor poor, Hutu nor Tutsi, grassroots development worker nor UN personnel, was able to give me a definitive answer. Some foresee a miracle. Others, a catastrophe.