

Rwandan general sentenced for role in 1994 genocide

By Susan Garth
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Augustin Bizimungu, head of the Rwandan army at the time of the 1994 genocide, has been sentenced to 30 years in prison by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. The killing of Tutsis and those who opposed the massacre resulted in the deaths of 800,000 people in the space of 10 days.

General Bizimungu has been found guilty of genocide and crimes against humanity. He was accused of preparing lists of those to be killed. He was said to have referred to them as “cockroaches”.

The 56-page indictment, which took two and half hours to read out in court, accused him of encouraging his troops to kill Tutsis, training the Hutu militia, the Interahamwe, and providing them with weapons and fuel to burn homes. The court heard that Bizimungu had done nothing to prevent his troops raping Tutsi women and girls and that he had turned his back on those who had begged to be spared.

The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) was created by the United Nations Security Council in November 1994. It sits in Arusha in neighbouring Tanzania. The latest sentences conclude what is known as the Military II trial. The Military I trial ended in 2008 and involved Colonel Theoneste Bagosora and other senior military figures.

Bizimungu pleaded not guilty, claiming that he had opposed the killings but had been able to exercise only “limited control” over his troops. The ICTR judges rejected his plea and found him guilty of inciting the killings.

He became head of the Rwandan army in 1994 after the existing army chief, Colonel Déogratias Nsabimana, was killed when President Juvenal Habyarimana’s plane was shot down. This incident provided the signal to begin the genocide. Mystery still surrounds the affair. The then Hutu government blamed the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) of Paul Kagame, who is now president, and he has accused Hutu extremists of shooting down the president’s plane in order to provide a pretext for a genocide that was already planned.

Bizimungu seems to have relied on Felicien Kabuga for

his rapid promotion in the army. Kabuga is often described as the financier of the genocide and remains on the wanted list. Theoneste Bagosora, who was sentenced to life imprisonment in 2008 for planning the genocide, backed Bizimungu to become army chief.

Bizimungu fled into the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), then Zaire, along with an estimated one million Hutus when the RPF took control of the Rwandan capital Kigali. He is alleged to have said at the time “The RPF will rule over a desert”.

He was captured in Angola in 2002. The US government had put a price of \$5 million on his head. His trial has gone on for the last nine years.

Convicted alongside Bizimungu was the former head of the Rwandan paramilitary police, Augustin Ndindiliyimana. He was sentenced to 11 years imprisonment for his part in the massacres. He got a shorter sentence because the judges found that he had had only “limited control” of his forces. He was arrested in Belgium in 2000 and was released after the verdict because he has already spent 11 years in jail.

Major Francois-Xavier Nzuwonemeye and Captain Innocent Sagahutu were found guilty of ordering their troops to murder Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana and the eight Belgian UN troops who were guarding her. They were each sentenced to 20 years in prison.

Following the deaths of the Belgian troops, the UN withdrew all its forces from Rwanda. This action allowed the killings to proceed without the presence of any international observers. Madeleine Albright, who was then United States ambassador to the UN, carefully avoided describing the killings that were known to be taking place in Rwanda as “genocide” since to do so would have precipitated UN intervention, and might have opened the door for America’s rivals. The US was far more concerned to allow a clear field for the RPF to achieve a military victory than to protect Rwandan civilians. Washington’s stance reflected the ongoing conflict between US and French interests in this former Belgian colony.

The role of the UN in the Rwandan genocide has not been

examined by the court. Its task has been to identify only those members of the former Rwandan regime who took part in these crimes. The part played by France, the US and international financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), in preparing the way the massacres has been covered over by a judicial process that is entirely under the control of the same imperialist powers who have dominated Africa for more than a century and to whom genocide and mass killings are no strangers. The powers that set up the ICTR are soaked in blood, and this court, with its deliberately restricted remit, has no legitimacy.

Prior to the Rwandan genocide the IMF had imposed a structural adjustment plan on this already desperately poor country. Prices shot up as the franc was devalued. Subsidies to agriculture were removed, health care and education collapsed as funding was cut. The IMF measures intensified the social tensions that were to be channelled into communal violence. Funds provided for economic development were instead channelled into arming the forces of the regime.

The division between the majority Hutus and the Tutsi elite was a legacy of Belgian colonialism. The Belgians had favoured the Tutsis and used them to control the rest of the population. By issuing identity cards that classified the population as Hutu or Tutsi the colonial authorities created a communal division that was to have long-lasting effects.

This policy of divide and rule continued as France brought Rwanda into its sphere of influence and supported the Hutus. France armed and trained the Rwandan army. The RPF was trained by Britain and the US. For France the Rwandan civil war became a question of retaining its influence in Francophone Africa. President François Mitterrand despatched troops to defend the regime in Operation Turquoise. France continued to support the Hutu extremist regime as the genocidal rhetoric mounted. Tutsis were murdered in the presence of French troops.

Once the RPF took the capital, French troops shepherded the defeated Rwandan army and Interahamwe militia across the border into camps in Zaire. Members of the regime that carried out the genocide, such as Agathe Kanziga Habyarimana, wife of the former president, are still sheltering in France. She was eventually arrested in March 2010, but has never been extradited.

The crimes the RPF committed when it pursued the Hutu militia into what became the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have been covered up by the UN and the US. A UN report on human rights violations in the DRC was suppressed after President Kagame of Rwanda objected to the suggestion that his forces might have committed genocide. Kagame threatened that he would pull Rwandan forces out of the UN peacekeeping mission in Darfur if the report were published. The report, which was indeed never

made public but leaked, alleges that Kagame's forces indiscriminately killed Hutu soldiers and civilians in the DRC.

While relations between Kagame and Washington have deteriorated in recent months since he began to turn toward China as a trade partner, the US still seems willing to support the current regime in Rwanda. Kagame has thus far been able to dismiss charges of human rights violations. He plays too valuable a strategic role in the mineral-rich Great Lakes Region to be displaced easily.

In a sign of the extent to which French policy in Africa has changed, President Nicolas Sarkozy visited Rwanda last year and referred to France's past "mistakes" in relation to Rwanda. Sarkozy's attempt to normalise diplomatic and commercial relations with Rwanda reflects his willingness to cooperate with Washington in Africa and his desire that French companies should exploit the gas reserves in Lake Kivu.

Even though Kagame is being courted by the French and retains American support, his position is far from unassailable. Opposition to his regime is mounting, and it may well be that Washington turns to one of his numerous opponents if he proves too recalcitrant. He may yet find himself sitting in the dock on war crimes charges.

Such a turn of events would in no way benefit the mass of the Rwandan population. It would merely serve to deepen communal conflicts. A legal process organised by the powers that are complicit in the crimes cannot bring any resolution to the conflicts in Rwanda or its neighbours. It is for the Rwandan people and the Congolese themselves to settle accounts with Kagame and the remnants of the previous Rwandan regime. In this they can expect no help from any of the imperialist powers, but only from the international working class.

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