UNEASY NEIGHBOURS – RECONCILIATION AFTER GENOCIDE

Twenty years after the genocide against the Tutsi, the event still dominates life in Rwanda. GIZ’s Civil Peace Service is helping to heal the wounds.

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The photos are densely packed on the walls. They show happy couples on their wedding day, mothers with newborns in their arms, young men, and schoolchildren. Today, every one of the people in the photos is dead. They died 20 years ago – shot, beaten, burned or stoned to death, victims of the slaughter that tore Rwanda apart in 1994, one of the worst genocides since the Second World War.

The photos are on display at the Kigali Genocide Memorial in Rwanda’s capital. The Memorial is situated in a park where some 250,000 victims of the genocide – including the people shown in the photos – are buried in mass graves. In the Museum, information boards attempt to explain the unexplainable: why neighbour turned against neighbour, why churches became slaughterhouses, why death lists were compiled with pedantic accuracy, why the Hutu were determined to wipe out the Tutsi – even though the two groups speak the same language, share the same culture, and have lived side by side for centuries.

These are all questions which preoccupy Freddy Mutanguha, Director of Aegis Trust in Rwanda, which is responsible for the Memorial. His father and four sisters were murdered during the genocide. He still finds it difficult to talk about the loss of his family. During the trial of his sisters’ murderers, he couldn’t bear to listen
to their confessions of guilt – it would have been far too painful.

Why do genocides happen? It’s a question which the Aegis Trust plans to investigate in future with its own newly established institute. It is setting up a regional research centre focusing on the prevention of crimes against humanity. The project is supported by GIZ’s Civil Peace Service (see article on page 42). A peace expert will advise Aegis on establishing the centre. The Civil Peace Service has been dealing with the impacts of the genocide for 13 years, ever since it began working in Rwanda. It provides support for victim groups, young radio producers who report on the impacts of genocide, and organisations that aim to prevent a renewed outbreak of violence in this Central African country.

The genocide started on 6 April 1994 – the day when Rwanda’s President Habyarimana was killed in a plane crash. The plane was shot down by a missile. It is still unclear who was responsible. Radical Hutu blamed the Tutsi. The Hutu government was already preparing a campaign to destroy the Tutsi. Radio broadcasts urged supporters to ‘kill the cockroaches’. The slaughter began less than an hour later. Hutu militias – who had been training for months – and the police and troops launched a full-scale campaign against the Tutsi. With their machetes, axes, hammers, pistols and rifles, they murdered around one million people. The victims included Hutu who were opposed to the government’s racism or who had Tutsi friends or spouses. Even GIZ’s predecessor organisations, GTZ and DED, lost at least 39 local staff in the slaughter.

Failure of the international community to act

Although the United Nations had deployed ‘blue helmet’ troops in Rwanda, they did not intervene. The international community failed Rwanda. Finally, a Tutsi rebel group, the Rwandan Patriotic Front, launched a campaign against the Hutu militia and the Rwandan army in order to stop the genocide, and civil war erupted. The rebels proved to be the stronger force and, on 4 July 1994, seized control of Kigali. Around one million people died in the genocide and the civil war, and two million fled to neighbouring countries.

‘Since then, a great many Tutsi have returned,’ says Ulrike Maenner, GIZ’s country director in Rwanda. The Tutsi are now an influential minority. But some of them fear that genocide could happen again. The Rwandan government is determined to prevent any fresh outbreaks of violence between the ethnic groups – with Germany’s assistance. ‘We are supporting reconciliation in the countryside, in the small villages,’ says Ulrike Maenner. ‘The impact of the genocide is still felt today.’ Although more than half the population was born after 1994, their parents and grandparents are still suffering, and this affects the children and grandchildren. Not a single family in Rwanda is untouched by the genocide.

Rwanda is one of the most densely populated countries in Africa, so victims and perpetrators cannot avoid each other. This leads to renewed suffering, hatred and conflict. Several Rwandan organisations are attempting to bring about reconciliation. The Civil Peace Service supports these endeavours, providing six peace workers as well as funding; this comes from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), which is providing a total of EUR 584,420 between January 2012 and December 2014. The aim is to secure a lasting peace, by overcoming enemy »
Remembering the victims

Rwanda has a population of around 11.5 million. The largest ethnic group, the Hutu, make up around 85% of the population, the Tutsi 14% and the Twa 1%. The Hutu, Tutsi and Twa speak the same language and share the same culture. The differences between them date back to pre-colonial times and were primarily social in nature: the Tutsi were wealthy cattle-owners, while the Hutu were poorer farmers. The Belgian colonial authorities based their rule on the Tutsi and created divisions between the two groups. When the Tutsi elite began to strive for independence in the late 1950s, the Belgians allocated posts in the administration to the Hutu. The first outbreaks of violence between the Hutu and Tutsi erupted in 1959. In April 1994, a 100-day genocide against the Tutsi began. One million people were killed. On 25 April, GIZ will hold its own ceremony of remembrance in Kigali in honour of the staff from its two predecessor organisations, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit and the German Development Service, who were killed in the genocide.

stereotypes, promoting non-violent conflict resolution and addressing the causes of the genocide. ‘We mainly work with young people,’ says Judith Baessler, GIZ’s Civil Peace Service coordinator in Rwanda. ‘Our aim is to strengthen and empower civil society for the long term.’ The Civil Peace Service is therefore working with the youth radio show Heza, and with Never Again Rwanda, a human rights and peace-building organisation which works with young people in schools, with Vision Jeunesse Nouvelle, which facilitates cross-border encounters between young Rwandans, Congolese and Burundians, and with the victims’ organisation IBUKA.

IBUKA, which means ‘remember’, is an umbrella organisation for the groups that aid survivors of the genocide and is committed to promoting reconciliation among Rwandans. IBUKA and the Civil Peace Service have provided trauma counselling and conflict transformation training for 90 social workers in Rwandan villages. They have already provided services to more than 2,000 people. The social workers no longer deal solely with the victims; they also reach out to the perpetrators.

In Nyakagezi, a village in Central Rwanda, two and a half hours from the capital, murderers and victims’ families are once again living side by side. It’s early February, and the home of social worker Jeanne Mukangeni, 41, is the setting for
a meeting between Christine Makajambere, 44, who lost her husband, and Daniel Kanamugire, 65, who spent nine years in prison for crimes committed during the genocide. Christine, widowed by the slaughter, explains how difficult it has been to live in her home village after the genocide. Like everyone else in Nyakagezi, she knew which of her neighbours had become killers. If she saw one of the murderers or looters in the distance, she ran away. Soon after the genocide, she gave birth to a child, but for years, she hid the child away, out of sight of the Hutu – for she had heard the Hutu saying that they wanted to wipe out all the Tutsi children. Christine explains that she had once attended a ceremony of remembrance for the victims, but she had collapsed screaming, before running out of the building. She felt as if she was losing her mind. It was social worker Jeanne who finally helped her. When Jeanne suggested that she should join a group which included some of the perpetrators, Christine was appalled. But later, she decided to come to the meetings. Now she feels better, she says. As she speaks, Daniel Kanamugire stares down at the concrete floor of the little house, which has a corrugated iron roof. He sits on a wooden chair, his hands in his lap, nervously kneading his fingers. He doesn’t say why he was sent to prison. He claims that he saved some Tutsi children. There are an awful lot of gaps in his story. It’s only when he talks about the reconciliation group that he smiles briefly.

Two and a half years ago, social worker Jeanne Mukangenzi set up a support group for 40 of the villagers. They talk, help each other in the fields, and assist each other through illness and problems. ‘We have become really good friends,’ says Daniel Kanamugire. Christine Makajambere nods in agreement. In Nyakagezi, reconciliation is a success.

Youth radio for reconciliation

Reconciliation is also a key issue for Radio Heza. Heza means ‘bright future’. The show is produced by young journalists aged between 16 and 26 and is broadcast three times a week. Once a month, it is broadcast beyond Rwanda’s borders into the Great Lakes region and reaches 700,000 listeners. This regional broadcast brings together young journalists from Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo and, since 2006, has reported on topics of interest to young people: problems at home and at school, relationships, sexuality, contraception, unemployment – and parents’ silence about the genocide. During the genocide, radio journalists played a particularly appalling role, inciting racial hate and urging Hutu to kill the Tutsi. Today’s programme makers want to show that radio journalism can bring people together. The 17 reporters and anchors are supported by German peace expert Johanna Wild. A professional journalist, she advises on topics for the next show and trains the team in conflict-sensitive journalism and impartial reporting. ‘We broadcast a story about a young man who has forgiven his parents’ killers,’ says 25-year-old student Nadine Uwamahoro. ‘Our listeners then discussed how that was possible and asked how they can learn to forgive.’ Heza also profiled some Hutu-Tutsi couples and broadcast a feature on the role that football can play in promoting peace.

Heza focuses intensively on the genocide, other than in April, when Rwanda’s period of official mourning begins. The bars, nightclubs and cafes close and no loud music is played. On 7 April, the Kwibuka Flame – the symbol of hope, which has been travelling around the country since the start of the year – returns to Kigali and arrives at the Genocide Memorial, where the main ceremony of remembrance will take place. Freddy Mutanguha will be there to remember his sisters and his father – like so many other Rwandans who lost loved ones in the genocide.

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