

## Background on the Rwanda Genocide

*In April 1994, extremist leaders of Rwanda's Hutu majority launched a campaign of extermination against the country's Tutsi minority. In 100 days, as many as 800,000 people were murdered and hundreds of thousands of women were raped. Three out of every four Tutsi in Rwanda were killed. This paper provides a brief background on the genocide.*

### Identity and Violence

The Central African nation of Rwanda has **two main social groups**: the **majority Hutu** (roughly 84%) and the **minority Tutsi** (roughly 15%). Belgian colonial rule in the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century institutionalized group identities that previously had been somewhat fluid and created an atmosphere of hostility and distrust between the groups. In 1959, as colonial rule neared an end, a Hutu "counter-elite" seized power from the Tutsi aristocracy that had run the country under the Belgians. Attacks on Tutsi accompanying independence in 1962 led to a large Tutsi exodus. Over the next thirty years, some Hutu leaders manipulated group antagonisms for political purposes, instigating periodic outbreaks of anti-Tutsi violence.

Events in Rwanda were influenced by those in neighboring Burundi, which also has a Hutu majority and a Tutsi minority. Unlike in Rwanda, Burundi's post-independence governments were dominated by Tutsi, whose leaders themselves periodically used violence against the Hutu for political purposes. Leaders in each country were able to point to violence in the other country to perpetuate and deepen group hostility.

In the late 1980s, drought and declining prices for coffee, a major Rwandan export, devastated the economy, and **Hutu dictator Juvenal Habyarimana's** monopoly on power was increasingly challenged within Rwanda.



### Vital Statistics:

**Size:** 26,338 sq km, slightly smaller than Maryland  
**Population:** 7,312,756 Hutu 84%, Tutsi 15%, Twa 1%  
**Religions:** Roman Catholic 52.7%, Protestant 24%, Adventist 10.4%, Muslim 1.9%, indigenous beliefs and other 6.5%, none 4.5% (1996)  
**Languages:** Kinyarwanda (official) universal Bantu vernacular, French (official), English (official), Kiswahili (Swahili) used in commercial centers

The **Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF)**, dominated by Tutsi exiles, invaded from Uganda in October 1990. Habyarimana and his supporters responded by labeling all Tutsi, as well as Hutu opponents of the regime, as collaborators of the invading force and therefore enemies of Rwanda. This tactic increased hostility between Hutu and Tutsi and divided Habyarimana's Hutu opponents, who had to choose between their commitment to democracy and the perceived Tutsi threat.

By August 1993, RPF success on the battlefield and international pressure led to the signing at Arusha, Tanzania, of peace accords that provided for the creation of a broad based transitional government and

eventual democratization. Although President Habyarimana signed the **Arusha Accords**, Hutu extremists close to him saw the prospect of power-sharing with Tutsis and the end of dictatorial rule as a grave threat to their political position. They set out to destroy the Accords.

### **“Hutu Power” and the Plan for Genocide**

The 1994 genocide differed from earlier massacres in its scope and intent: all Tutsi in Rwanda were targeted and left without any safe haven. The extremists’ **“Hutu Power” ideology** ultimately asserted that Hutu and Tutsi could not co-exist, so the Tutsi had to be destroyed. By early 1994, the extremists had begun planning to wipe out the Tutsi. Militia were trained, arms were distributed, lists were drawn up, and anti-Tutsi propaganda was intensified.

On **April 6, 1994**, President Habyarimana died when his plane was hit by a surface to air missile as it prepared to land in Kigali. It still is unknown who fired the missile, but the extremists took it as a signal to put their plan into action. They seized control of the government and murdered moderate Hutu and Tutsi leaders who might have calmed the situation. They used their control of radio to coordinate the killing and to urge the general Hutu population to join in. Hutu Power militias, such as the **Interahamwe**, set up roadblocks and hunted down Tutsi. As the killing spread across Rwanda, the Hutu Power leaders used influence, threats and coercion to push more moderate local officials into joining the genocide. Hutu who helped Tutsi were also killed. In 100 days, between 500,000 and 800,000 people were murdered, including three-quarters of Rwanda’s Tutsi.

### **Rwanda Abandoned**

A small UN peacekeeping force, led by **Canadian General Roméo Dallaire**, was sent to Rwanda in late 1993 to help

implement the Arusha Accords. The mission was never fully funded. Many of the troops arrived without basic equipment and were poorly trained. In early 1994, General Dallaire learned that the extremists were making preparations for mass killing of Tutsi and that the plans included killing peacekeepers to provoke the withdrawal of his force. But his superiors at UN Headquarters in New York prohibited him from seizing arms caches or taking other action to disrupt those preparations.

On the first day of the genocide, 10 Belgian peacekeepers were captured and murdered, and their bodies were mutilated. General Dallaire asked for reinforcements, with which he believed he could stop the killing. Instead, the UN Security Council reduced his force to a token number. European troops did arrive, but only to evacuate western expatriates. In late June, after most of the killing was over, France deployed a force to southwestern Rwanda in a controversial operation that had the effect, if not the intent, of protecting the killers as they fled to Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo) in the face of RPF advances.

### **Searching for Justice, Striving for Reconciliation**

The genocide ended in July 1994, when the RPF pushed the extremists out of the country.

The consequences of the genocide continue to be felt. It left Rwanda devastated, hundreds of thousands of survivors traumatized, the country’s infrastructure in ruins and over 100,000 accused perpetrators imprisoned. Justice and accountability, unity and reconciliation, remain elusive.

The entire central African region also is destabilized. The escape of the *genocidaires* into Congo ultimately led to conflict there and a collapse of social infrastructure that has claimed more than 3 million lives.

**Further Reading on Rwanda**  
(most are available in the Museum store)

- Michael Barnett, *Eyewitness to a Genocide: The United Nations and Rwanda*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002.
- Alison des Forges, "*Leave None To Tell the Story*": *Genocide in Rwanda*, New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999.
- Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish To Inform You that Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families: Stories from Rwanda*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998.
- Linda Melvern, *A People Betrayed: The Role of the West in Rwanda's Genocide*, New York: Zed Books, 2000.
- Samantha Power, "*A Problem from Hell*": *America and the Age of Genocide*, New York: Basic Books, 2002.
- G rard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.

**Websites**

- <http://www.ushmm.org/conscience>
- <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/evil/>
- <http://www.americanradioworks.org/features/justiceontrial/rwanda1.html>
- <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB53/press.html>
- Internews reports: <http://www.internews.org/regions/africa.htm>