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## *Commemorating the Rwandan genocide*

**The genocide of the Tutsi minority in Rwanda began on the 7th of April 1994: within a few weeks, radical Hutu had killed over 800,000 Tutsi as well as moderate and oppositional Hutu, and other opposing factions. The international community intervened too late.**

A United Nations Day of Remembrance is held on 7th of April to globally commemorate the Rwandan Genocide, which occurred during about 100 days between April and mid-July 1994. Radical members of the Hutu majority population killed over 800,000 people, mostly from the Tutsi minority, but also moderate and oppositional Hutu as well as members of the Twa, who make up a very small part of the population [1]. Moreover, it is estimated that between 150,000 and 250,000 women were raped during this period. In addition to the police, military and Hutu militias, countless Hutu civilians participated in the attacks and acts of violence, some of whom murdered their own neighbours.

## *The causes of conflict go back to the colonial era*

The genocide brought to a head a conflict whose social and political roots go back to the colonisation of Rwanda by Germany and Belgium [2]. For centuries prior to colonisation, the Hutu and Tutsi had maintained common ties and traditions. It was only the racially motivated unequal treatment of the various population groups by the colonial powers that created a split between the dominant Tutsi minority and the oppressed Hutu majority, which in turn led to an unjust social and power structure. It was also the Belgian colonial masters who first introduced personal ID documents and thus the distinction between Hutu, Tutsi and Twa. This resulted in a perception among individuals within the population, which developed and was consolidated over the decades, that they belong to a specific ethnic group.

Hutu uprisings against the Belgian colonial power and the Tutsi elite began to shift the balance of power between 1959 and 1961. Some 150,000 Tutsi fled to neighbouring countries for fear of violence and persecution during these uprisings. After gaining its independence in 1962, Rwanda was led by a Hutu government. Following independence, thousands more Tutsi fled to Burundi, where a resistance movement formed. Those remaining in Rwanda were systematically oppressed.

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## The catalyst for the genocide was the assassination of President Habyarimana

The immediate prehistory of the genocide included attacks by Tutsi rebels from the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which was founded in 1987 and operated out of Uganda. Led by Paul Kagame, they had been fighting against the Hutu regime since 1990 to enforce the Tutsi minority's demand for political participation. In 1990, for example, some 12,000 RPF fighters (including oppositional Hutu) invaded Rwanda and conquered large swathes of the north. The civil war appeared to have ended when the peace treaty of Arusha (Tanzania) was signed in August 1993. Among other things, the agreement provided for a broad-based transitional government including the RPF as well as the introduction of a multi-party system. The United Nations Security Council (Resolution 872) decided to deploy the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR), the aim of which was to help stabilise the country, but with no mandate for military intervention. Hutu extremists firmly rejected the Arusha Agreement and continued to radicalise.

The specific trigger event for the genocide was the shooting down of President Habyarimana's plane on the evening of 6 April 1994, which still remains unexplained. The murders of moderate Hutu politicians and the Tutsi population began just half an hour later. The Hutu government blamed the Tutsi and put out a radio call asking citizens to kill all Tutsi. Even before that, broadcasters had been systematically harassing the minority and inciting people to murder for many months. The genocide, which began in the night of the 7th of April, went on for about 100 days. Many Tutsi sought refuge in churches or other places of refuge, where they were massacred with machetes, beaten to death, or shot. The genocide only ended in July, after the RPF had succeeded in conquering the whole of Rwanda.

A transitional government of national unity was formed on 19 July, with Pasteur Bizimungu, a Hutu, as President and Paul Kagame, a Tutsi and leader of the RPF, as Vice-President.

## The failure of the United Nations

The United Nations was unable to prevent the atrocities despite the fact that United Nations troops were stationed in Rwanda at the time under the auspices of the UNAMIR peace mission [3]. A report by the UN human rights investigator for Rwanda had warned of an escalation of violence between the different population groups as early as August 1993. The Canadian commander of the UN peacekeeping mission in Rwanda also sent warnings of genocide to UN headquarters in New York in early January 1994 but he was strictly forbidden from taking action against the secret weapons depots of Hutu militias, because, among other things, there was no corresponding mandate from the UN Security Council. Moreover, UNAMIR had been deployed as a peacekeeping force for the Arusha Agreement and was therefore structurally and technically unprepared for the scale of the fighting that broke out in April. Instead, the member states participating in the mission even began withdrawing



their troops at first. On 21 April 1994, two weeks after the atrocities began, the United Nations Security Council decided to reduce the original number of troops from over 2500 to just 270 and only increased the number to 5500 in mid-May. The first French-led forces did not reach the southwest of the country until 23 June, following a decision by the UN Security Council the previous day.

Over two million people, mainly Hutu but also Tutsi, including many of the members of the government, armed forces and militiamen involved in the genocide, fled to neighbouring countries after the establishment of a transitional government under Tutsi Kagame. Most of them fled to neighbouring Zaire (now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo) and Tanzania. There were also some 2.5 million internally displaced persons.



Genocide and refugee movements in Rwanda 1993/1994

[Click here for the high resolution version of the map in PDF format](#) License [cc by-nc-nd/3.0/en/](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/en/) (mr-kartographie)



## Judicial investigation

The judicial investigation into the mass murders continued for many years and is still not completely finished. It was conducted at the international, national, and regional levels. As of November 1994, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) in Tanzania began the prosecution of genocide and other serious human rights violations on behalf of the UN Security Council. During its eleven years of activity, the ICTR dealt with a total of 93 cases against those primarily responsible for the genocide from the fields of politics, business, the media, and the military. It imposed 61 prison sentences and acquitted 14 defendants: some cases were also handed over to the national judiciary. Since then, the UN International Residual Mechanisms for Criminal Tribunals, which is the successor organisation to the ICTR, whose mandate officially ended in 2015, has been responsible for bringing suspects to justice.

At the national level, the Rwandan government began the first trials in 1996. National courts were given a mandate to bring genocide suspects to justice at lower levels. One of the reasons for the delay was that the country had lost a large part of its judicial professionals.

Rwanda revived the traditional community courts, so-called gacacas, to hold the large number of perpetrators in Rwandan prisons accountable, but also to advance the reconciliation process. According to the Gacaca Commission, these lay courts tried over one million cases, including many involving murders and robberies, between 2005 and 2012.

## A mixed outcome for the judicial proceedings

The results of the gacaca courts are mixed. It is true that in many cases the proceedings have enabled relatives and survivors to obtain certainty about the whereabouts of the victims and the circumstances of their deaths. They also provided the perpetrators with the opportunity to repent and ask for forgiveness. At the same time, human rights organisations, such as Human Rights Watch, are critical of the fact that, in many cases, neither credible verdicts were pronounced, nor justice secured. Nor were crimes committed by the current ruling party and the former rebel movement RPF before, during and after the genocide subject to legal review.

Foreign courts also tried high-ranking military officers and other Hutu war criminals. The Oberlandesgericht (Higher Regional Court) of Frankfurt, for example, sentenced a Rwandan village mayor to life imprisonment. Two high-ranking Hutu militiamen, who were living in Germany as refugees, were also brought to justice in this country.



## Severe penalties for the denial of genocide

The memory of the Rwandan genocide is currently being kept alive in over 240 memorials. In recent years, the reconciliation process has made great progress, yet relations between the two population groups remain fragile.

International observers praise the fact that Rwanda's government has been combatting any new form of racial discrimination for many years. Denial of the genocide can even be punished by imprisonment, and Rwandan citizens are no longer allowed to refer to themselves as either Hutu or Tutsi.

In recent years, the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission has, with the aid of the NGO Prison Fellowship Rwanda, set up reconciliation villages in which perpetrators live together with survivors. These activities are part of the national discourse on unity and reconciliation.

## President Kagame rules in an authoritarian manner

Over the past two decades, Rwanda's economy has prospered compared with many African countries: the infrastructure is good in many areas and inflation is relatively low. The prosperity of some classes has increased significantly, although broad sections of the population are still living in poverty. Some Rwandan laws, such as the nationwide ban on plastic bags and the high proportion of women in the Rwandan parliament (61 per cent), are attracting attention around the world.

However, hopes for the development of a stable democracy with comprehensive civil rights have largely gone unfulfilled. According to human rights organisations, human rights violations and political as well as media freedom restrictions are widespread. The judiciary is considered relatively effective, yet de facto, it is not independent of the government. Thus, the Freedom House Index continues to classify Rwanda as "not free".

Since 2000, the Tutsi Paul Kagame has ruled the country as President. According to official figures, Kagame won the last presidential election on the 4th of August 2017 with over 98 percent of the vote. His third term of office had only been enabled by means of a controversial constitutional amendment. Kagame governs in an authoritarian manner: the opposition is massively suppressed. He is also criticised for supporting rebels in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

## Further reading in German

- [Julia Viebach: Ruanda \(Dossier Innerstaatliche Konflikte\)](#)
- [Current background \(2017\): Presidential election in Rwanda](#)
- [Politics and contemporary history \(2020\): German colonial history](#)



- [The war and peace information portal](#)
- [Dossier Innerstaatliche Konflikte: Vergangenheitsarbeit](#)

## Footnotes

1. Over seven million people lived in Rwanda in 1994. The population consisted of three different ethnic groups: the Hutu (about 85% of the population), the Tutsi (about 14%), and the Twa (about 1%).
2. Rwanda was a German colony until the middle of the First World War (1884-1916) and then a Belgian colony until 1962.
3. United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda.

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