

MY FAITH GUIDED ME THROUGH GENOCIDE

My greatest wish is that the message of these lines is seen in the context of the suffering and bravery of the people of Rwanda, who filled their churches hardly five months after the genocide. –Ms. Bertha Semu-Somi

Background

On July, 1987, I went as a representative from the United Republic of Tanzania to the beautiful, small country of Rwanda; friendly people, almost comparable to Marquette. The people were humble, unassuming, and almost docile.

They held great affection and adoration to their President (they had many, endearing songs in his name. They were also dedicated worshipers, a Church going community—the majority of them Catholic. I was six months pregnant and looked forward to raise my child in this community for the four years I would be there.

Security and Politics

There were no police or army on the streets. However, poverty among the majority was obvious, evidenced by lots of unemployed youths in street corners throughout the day. Two major ethnic groups lived side by side. They had historical dividing lines that had become accepted, and caused no friction allowing for inter-marriages. However, two regions of the North were almost entirely populated by one ethnic group. The country's President came from the North.

In 1989, multiparty politics were declared at a Francophone Summit in France.

Refugees, who left Rwanda in 1959, all from the other ethnic group, lived in neighbouring countries but also Europe and the Americas. They demanded to return to form part of the opposition. In 1990, there was a Border incident. Some of these refugees then living in Uganda took up arms and attempted a forced return.

In 1991, a new Constitution was proclaimed to allow for multiparty politics. Opposition political parties were formed. Sharp regional divisions emerged immediately, characterised by violent political demonstrations. The ruling party drew its membership from the North of the country.

Build up to the Genocide

In October, 1992, overnight shooting was heard in the capital Kigali. We were told it was an invasion. Massive arrests followed, targeting one of the ethnic groups for alleged support of the refugees. This was the time I was to wind up my tour of duty. My Govt. asked that I stay on longer to monitor and report on the situation. But, as the situation grew from bad to worse, no officer was ready to replace me!!!

From then on it was a roller coaster of events. Demonstrations led to increased security incidents, political assassinations, protracted civil war and genocide.

Sanity challenged / Breakdown of a Community

One of those arrested **in 1992** and held in 'safe houses' used to be our tailor (seamstress). His name was Bosco. On the 4th day without food or water, Bosco and three others were so hungry they identified a fellow inmate whom they decided they were going to **kill and eat** his flesh that night. Fortunately a Red Cross team was given access and brought them food and water. Upon release, Bosco came to the Embassy to narrate the incident and seek help. He was afraid he could not recognise himself!! His sanity was highly challenged; was he still human, he asked? What should he do? The irony was that they wanted to kill someone from their own ethnic group, not enemy. We were terrified. All we could offer was prayer. **There were many others like Bosco** as the violence mounted.

We were terrified. All we could offer was prayer. **I DON'T KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM** and his family as the violence built up.

Hired to Kill

In April 1994, at the onset of the genocide, a young man, John, called us early one morning to go and see him at a house nearby. He was completely lost, and devastated, because he did not know what to do with himself. He had just killed a **high level** politician. John had earlier been recruited and paid to disrupt opposition meetings. However, on the second day of the genocide this **high level** politician was brought to a 'safe' house he was guarding. They were ordered to kill **her**. After the killing, he had no counselling, no protection, no defence. He was also a foreigner without documentation. We walked away quietly, very afraid. **I DON'T KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM.**

Night Calls

Throughout the first week of the genocide, women who knew me were calling in the middle of the night. You would hear background noises I cannot describe. She would say, "You diplomats come and help us, they have killed my brothers! They are killing my husband!" I could do nothing except pray. **I DON'T KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO MOST OR ALL OF THEM.**

Stranded Diplomats

A lady from the Burundi Embassy called me, they could not go to their houses and they had nothing to eat. I cooked food and my watchman took this to her. Then I think on the 3rd day he was not allowed access to her. The lady kept calling, saying the children were crying too much, exposing them to danger and they were also dying of hunger! I couldn't do anything! **I DON'T KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO HER AND HER CHILDREN.**

Killings in Churches

Then it was the cries from the Church below, **St. Famille**. People fleeing their houses found Churches to be the logical place for safety. Some were encouraged by Pastors to go there, only to realise that they were only safe the first few days as they waited for the place to fill up, before killers were called in. Victims were thus lured into Churches to be killed.

Me and my family

We rented a house in a posh area near the Embassy. Houses in Rwanda had glass windows and doors. With the bombings glasses were cracking and bullets came through. Most of the time, we had to squat on the corridors for safety. My son (almost 7 years then) repeatedly asked whether he was from Tanzania and why we could not go home.

Ten days into the genocide I was one of only three diplomats left in Rwanda (A fellow Tanzanian diplomat, the Libyan Ambassador and I). I had evacuated my children, thanks to the American Embassy. We also moved to another Embassy residence that had a basement. However, we no longer had food.

Then, THEN on that day in 1994

We went to the Libyan Cultural centre to look for food. At a road block, we saw a lady with an open skull, freshly cut with machete in a Red-Cross pick-up vehicle. The vehicle was not allowed through as long as it had a Rwandan still breathing no matter how badly injured.

At the Centre, we found no food, we found one lady who had survived massive killings there and dead bodies all around. Maybe there were a couple others that did not trust us coming out but then, we could not help this one either. We left her there. **I DON'T KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO HER**

Afraid to the Maximum

Back at the house, the image of the lady with the open skull never left my mind. I vomited **sooo** much. I could not eat. I could not sleep. At this point, **I ACCEPTED DEATH AND DECIDED TO TALK TO GOD.**

I felt so alone, so useless to others and extremely vulnerable. Being a diplomat did not help, as the UN soldiers there could not help. All communication with the outside had been cut. However, I didn't try to run or hide; I knew it would be futile. All around me was death and dying. We were either going to die from the bullets, from hunger or soldiers from either side or worse still, **the militia** could walk in through the door any time. We decided to go home to Tanzania and let death meet us **outside if it must.**

As if by miracle, during that night I received new courage. I had tried to pray without much success. So I decided to stop praying and **talked to God.**

Don't laugh at me, but, I felt I was close enough to God to talk to Him. I said to God; I did not see how I was going to survive. I entrusted myself to Him and asked Him for a favour – **my children**. The only one thing I was afraid of at this point was being a **missing person**. I did not want my children to wait or search for years thinking I had perhaps gone to some country and might show up one day.

After talking to God, I got tremendous confidence and courage to go out. With this new courage, I convinced my two colleagues that we go to the army HQ in Kigali and let them know that we were leaving for Tanzania.

Since I had attended all political party meetings where diplomats were invited, my face was quite familiar. The in-charge was thus immediately sympathetic, saying the militia at the roadblocks were ruthless and gave us a platoon of soldiers to escort us to the border with Burundi—the only outlet that was still open.

As fate would have it, at the 2nd roadblock of many, the militia disarmed these soldiers. We had to continue on our own and we learned later that all 18 were killed at the roadblock!! **NO HUMAN PROTECTION WAS GOING TO BE POSSIBLE.**

Normal travel from Rwanda to Burundi was usually a two hour drive. This time due to the many roadblocks, we left Kigali at 9:00am and arrived in Burundi at 7:00 pm. Almost 12 hours!! The border was closed that night!! We had crossed to **physical** safety.

Some Questions persisted

1. What happened to all the characters I cited above who were calling for help? Is there anything I could have done? Did I do my best?
2. Talking to God—did I bargain with God? For years I was afraid and felt guilty that I had perhaps bargained with God, but looking back, I feel the Holy Spirit had guided me to surrender to His will and I had the courage to ask for His favour, which He graciously granted ten-fold.

Therefore, I can now, and only now say that this was a defining moment in what one might call the journey of Faith.

To go out, to finish being afraid and just walk out into the danger itself! Putting behind all cowardice and weakness, forgetting I was a woman and six months pregnant at the time, yes, another child!! I don't know how else to describe that courage.

Again looking back now, I realise I was very rich in Faith.

Fear not, for God listens.

Please join me in thanking God for His graciousness, and may we always, trust in His will and Mercy.

***“Because He lives, I can face tomorrow
Because He lives, All Fear is Gone,
Because I know
He holds the future,
And life is worth the living just
Because He lives”***