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A week in Goma: The genocide may have stopped, more or less, but the torments of the people of Rwanda - self-inflicted and otherwise - continue in the cholera-ravaged refugee camps across the border in Zaire. Report by Robert Block

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THE slaughter in Rwanda may have been an expression of the bestiality of man, but what is happening in the refugee camps in Zaire today is surely the wrath of God. Epidemics of biblical proportions sweep the land. Water is poison. Volcanoes belch fire and smoke. The dead are everywhere, wrapped in straw mats or cloth tied up with rope and left on the roadside to await burial. Impenetrable black igneous rock makes it virtually impossible to find a place to put the bodies. It is as if Mother Earth herself did not want to accept the remains of the Hutu refugees from Rwanda.

The Hutus, indoctrinated by their leaders, incited by political militias, supported by their army, killed - or silently watched others kill - 500,000 people whose only crime was to be members of the Tutsi minority or fellow Hutus who did not support the ruling party. Even infants were deemed fair game. The victims were hacked to death with machetes, burnt alive or shot, to cheers, songs and laughter. In Rwanda, genocide was not only encouraged, it was applauded.

What made the slaughter so hard to digest was that Rwanda was supposed to have been Africa's most Catholic country. More than two-thirds of the people devoutly believed in the dictates of the Holy See. In villages of small mud huts, huge churches were constructed of brick and mortar and dominated the countryside as they once did in medieval Europe. Religion played such a central role in Rwandan life that when danger came, people sought protection in churches and parish schools. But the sanctity of God's houses was not respected by those bent on delivering death. The history of what has happened in Rwanda since the suspicious death of the President, Juvenal Habyarimana, on 6 April, is today written in browning bloodstains on the walls of chapels, cathedrals and convents throughout the land.

It seems only logical after what happened in Rwanda that God should be angry. Those of us who witnessed at first hand what the Hutus did to the Tutsis cannot help but see the hand of divine retribution at work among the Hutu refugees in Zaire today. The people who killed are now reaping the bitter harvest they have sown.

Question: Do you agree with the author's opinion that "the people who killed are now reaping the bitter harvest they have sown."? Do you think God is intentionally punishing the Hutu group for their collective actions?

Cholera and dysentery have been striking the refugees down by the thousand. According to the best estimates of the understaffed and overwhelmed relief agencies working in Zaire to bring a bit of dignity and comfort to the refugees, at least 30,000 people have died from disease since they first arrived 17 days ago. Thousands more are expected to die in coming weeks: alone and delirious in the dust of the roadside, or in banana groves alongside piles of excrement, or in hot barren fields of volcanic rock, in a sprawling refugee camp far from home.

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To understand what keeps more than a million people living and dying in these conditions, it is necessary to understand what led them to leave Rwanda in the first place. Largely uneducated peasant farmers, the Hutus got up and left their country in the same way that they got up and killed the Tutsis - because they were told to.

Representatives of the militarily defeated Hutu government played their final hand in the last days of Rwanda's civil war and whipped up hysteria among an already panicked population. Their message was: follow your leaders into exile or face certain death at the hands of the Tutsi rebels of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF).

Fear was also an important factor in pushing people across the border. Convinced by years of broadcasts portraying the RPF as a vengeful army bent on the complete subjugation of Hutus, the people were too terrified to test the RPF's promises of reconciliation. And then there is the guilt. 'After what happened to the Tutsis we ran because we did not think the RPF would ever be able to forgive us,' a refugee told me.

Question: Do you think love or fear is a bigger motivation to people? Explain your reasoning

Question: Based on what you already know about the Genocide, do you think fear or guilt was a bigger motivation for the Hutu? Explain your reasoning.

The result is that a vast population of the innocent and the guilty has fled a slaughterhouse for a humanitarian disaster. But even amid death and deprivation, life goes on. Humanity, faced even with the most unbearable situation, always finds a way to cope.

Unpaved roads pitted with pot-holes the size of trenches shake passengers' bones and rattle the suspensions of cars and trucks. The roads wind around the shores of Lake Kivu, one of the great lakes of Africa, and meander through plains surrounded by volcanoes, which glow red at night and spew dust and smoke. On one side of the roads are piles of the dead: some fresh, others bloated and ready to burst their wrapping. On the other side of the road, there is life. Refugees sell corn and rice and beans all laid out on grimy plastic sheets on the verges of the street. Some of the goods are from humanitarian relief supplies. Some have been bought with the proceeds from livestock the people brought with them, or from stolen goods that the desperate took as they fled.

The roads are thronged with people. Demobilised soldiers walk up and down the roads and trails that cut through the camps. Men hold radios to their ears. There are cows and goats and boys pushing jerry cans of contaminated water on wooden scooters. Pipe-smoking women spend their days cooking and comforting the innumerable children whose cries waft above the noise of the thousands on the move and the sweet and rancid odours of camp life. The smells of food, sweat and smoke from cooking fires mix with those of excrement and decomposing bodies.

Yet Goma is actually in better shape than when the crisis started. The refugees are no longer crammed into the city itself but are spread over a network of 60 miles of roads. There are now 16 camps in the Goma region, ranging from an orphanage at Ndosho, which is home to 4,000 children, to the sprawl of Katale, further north, where 400,000 people are gathered under the administration of the relief group Care International.

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Throughout the camps there are those for whom one's heart breaks and those at the sight of whom it freezes. At the Kibumba camp south of Katale last week, a small girl of about eight years old, seeing my white skin and assuming me to be an aid worker, used the last of her strength to approach me while I was interviewing a boy scout leader in charge of collecting bodies. (The death detail in Goma is being conducted by young Zaireans looking not for some kind of grisly merit badge but for food and clean water. Zaireans in Goma are little better off than the refugees.) Despite her efforts the girl could not make it. She collapsed at my feet, her spindly fingers trying to grasp my trouser-leg while the mouth moved and her sunken eyes flickered. I froze. A doctor from Medecins Sans Frontieres rushed to pick her up, but it was clear that the girl was at death's door.

Nearby, a man was hacking away at the carcass of a cow he had just slaughtered with a swift blow from his machete. At times he would pick up a slab of meat and chop at it with his hand directly underneath the blade. The deftness with which he was able to cut through the meat and not touch his hand showed the same skill used by many in the camp when they turned their weapons against their Tutsi neighbours or friends.

Question: Describe your emotional response to these two scenes (child death and man with machete)

There is no doubt that there are killers in the camps. But the scale of killing was so great, the complicity so widespread, that there is almost no way of knowing who killed and who tried to help the victims. 'Every third man in this camp is probably a murderer,' said Mike McDonough of Concern Worldwide. 'We have to feed the destitute, but I feed these people with a heavy heart.'

Perhaps most disheartening of all is that most of the Hutus - despite their agony - still do not recognise that what happened to the Tutsis was a crime of enormous proportions. There is a state of collective denial by almost everyone you meet in the camps. People do not see their ordeal as self-imposed but as the fault of the Tutsis and the RPF. 'We are dying here because of the Tutsis and the cockroaches of the RPF who want to rule over us,' said one woman, who was absolutely convinced of the correctness of killing Tutsis.

It will be perhaps three weeks before the huge international relief effort now being co-ordinated in at least six countries is able to get water-pumping stations, treatment plants, sanitation centres and field hospitals up and running at the level needed to stabilise the situation. By that time many of the refugees, sick of living in horror, may decide to ignore their fear of the RPF and go home. Already there is a trickle of men and women going back to Rwanda to assess the situation, and these will report back to their relatives about what they find. If the news is good, relief workers expect a vast spontaneous repatriation, even of the ill, who will want to go home to die.

But the question is how many will go back with regret, forgiveness or understanding in their hearts. As one British aid agency official said: 'God and the world still have much work to do before there can be justice for the dead in Rwanda.'

Question: What pros/cons do you think Hutus considered about staying in or leaving the refugee camps?

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