

## IMPRESSIONS FROM RWANDA

By  
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[I visited Rwanda between May 28 and June 2, 2009. The main purpose was to attend the Peace and Development International workshop, organized by the National University of Rwanda, McGill University, the World Bank and the Rwanda Governance Advisory Council (a private non-profit, with strong ties to the government), and financed by the World Bank and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). The workshop was part of a larger project that includes a number of thematic or theoretical papers on power-sharing and post-conflict reconstruction and seven case studies of countries that have experienced post-conflict reconstruction. My former student, Gary Milante of the World Bank, and I have written a thematic paper on power-sharing as part of this project.]

Kigali, the capital, is well-laid out, built on a number of steep hills, clean and orderly, especially for such a poor place. There are motorcycle taxis that you can take around, in addition to regular cabs (usually, 15-to-20 year old Toyotas but there are some SUVs used to visit national parks) and minibuses. People are generally skinny and dignified, walk around a lot, as probably the cost of transportation is too high for most. Many do have a vacuous, tired look in their faces. Is it the drudgery of life or even the inadequate calorie intake? Apparently (according to student Jean-Bosco, named unverified), the unskilled daily wage in Kigali is about 1,000-1,500 Rwandan Franks (between less than \$2 and less than \$3) and housing is a serious problem for such workers there. (Agricultural workers get about \$1 a day.) There are apartment complexes and villas, but also favela-like dwellings, which however colleagues say are more substantial and better-taken care of than most Brazilian favelas. The US embassy sits huge atop a hill; it looks bigger than that in Bolivia and I wonder why it is so big. (We also went to the real "Hotel Rwanda.")

The countryside is very hilly and densely populated, as there seems to be no view without dwellings or people somewhere to be seen. Most of the housing consists of small houses with mud-brick walls, sometimes stuccoed, and slanted roofs made out of corrugated metal and less frequently out of tiles, the roof sitting atop wood. I didn't see any outhouses; it seems, they just use open pits for going to the bathroom. There is no electricity (and, therefore, no TV) in the countryside. A small minority of rural housing and all public buildings are made out of more substantial materials: bricks, sometimes stone or concrete. Hipolito, the colleague from Mozambique, said that rural housing looks richer here than his home country. People walk around everywhere, with bundles or containers on their heads. Also, many people hanging around the houses. Bicycles are common, but no donkeys or horses are around. Perhaps these animals cannot survive in the tropical climate. Some cows and more goats seem to be carefully taken care of.

Butare, though the second largest city, has just one paved road. To get to the hotel, the bus had to go through muddy, red-earth street which at one place close to the hotel was

essentially a lake. The hotel compound (Le Petit Prince) had dining facilities, and an auditorium in which the case-study authors presented the main lessons for each country and responded to questions from National University of Rwanda faculty and students. We had cocktails in the extensive garden of the hotel and I talked to three students. The students appear to be pretty poor, but well-dressed and ambitious. One of them is a 29-year old Tutsi who lost all his family during the genocide and stopped going to school for a while. I didn't get to talk to him much. They all mentioned the difficulties in accessing computers and expressed their ambition not to get government jobs but get MAs and striking it on their own. One student mentioned that his mother had to sell two or three cows to finance his education (they also do get grants and loans from the government) with no resources left to educate his three sisters.

From Butare we drove for more than half an hour, through verdant, and very crowded, valleys and hills to the Imumbari (?) genocide memorial. It's on the grounds of a high school that was partially built at the time of the genocide. All the Tutsis from the surrounding areas were instructed by the authorities at the time, including by the local Catholic Bishop, to go to schools and other public building, supposedly to be better protected there. Instead, that was a convenient way of getting all the Tutsis in one place so that they could be killed more easily. According to Bernard (African historian, who grew up and was educated in Tanzania), after 60,000 had come to the high school area over three days, they were surrounded and killed systematically. Bernard said that only 4 escaped including one man with a scarred head who was there – he was tall, very skinny, with a shaved scarred skull, and of indeterminate age. When the French arrived and saw the bodies, they brought a Caterpillar bulldozer to bury them in mass graves and, again according to Bernard's intensely anti-French rhetoric, set up a volleyball court over the graves in order to better compact the earth and hide the evidence. After the RPF came to power, they started digging the graves and counted 40,000 bodies. Other graves might exist in the area.

We next started going towards the classrooms of the high school and I was not expecting what came next. On wooden slats on classroom after classroom, lay partially decomposed bodies that were preserved, and completely covered, by a white substance that smelled something between death and formaldehyde. The first room was full of small kids, many with one hand protecting their head from machete strikes. It was not easy to see, though the white substance gave them a cover of unreality. A woman who had joined us from the university started wailing uncontrollably – she had actually been hidden by three different families to avoid death during the months that the genocide was taking place.

While we were going around the memorial area, many people from the surrounding houses were looking at us with poker-faced curiosity. After repeatedly asking Bernard and others, including the survivor (through translation), it came out that the majority of the many people in the area are not newcomers but the same inhabitants – presumably Hutus – who lived here before the genocide. The village process of justice called *gacaca* has not uncovered many perpetrators from the area because there are very few witnesses who survived and, presumably, those who were perpetrators or bystanders are not willing to talk. It is, as Purnier says, like having Israel in Bavaria, with Jews leaving side by side

with former Nazis and SS members. The aftermath is more complex than those of the Jewish or Armenian genocides.

On the surface, it appears that Rwandans deal remarkably well with the genocide: they have constructed memorials, talk openly about the details or even the mechanics, they have the *gacaca* courts or ordinary courts, and they maintain a narrative – a discourse – that the government transmits through the media and educational institutions. However, I never talked to someone I knew is a Hutu or even an adult Tutsi who was present in Rwanda during the genocide. Bernard, Musahara, Public Services Minister Murezeki, the driver Louis, were Tutsis who grew up abroad (Bernard and Musahara in Tanzania, Louis in Zaire and Uganda), with their families there since 1959 and who came back to Rwanda after the genocide. They were essentially foreigners who came and took over after 1994. How are they perceived by the majority Hutus who toil in the fields all day long? The Tutsi or mixed students I spoke to essentially toe the official party line. How about all those Hutu fighters who roam around the Congo and elsewhere now waiting for their chance to come back? How about all the atrocities, including massacres of perhaps 10,000 at a time, that the RPF (the ruling party since 1994) has perpetrated too many times to count?

The Rwandan genocide served as the catalyst for the Congo and other wars in surrounding countries in which at least 5 million human beings died, many under as horrific circumstances as those in the genocide. It has been the result of the combination of extreme poverty in which young men have no future other than join for the loot, modern lethal weaponry (that did not exist during the numerous other times of similar brutality in human history), and globalized interactions in taking out resources and the resultant competition among way too many state and non-state actors. It is difficult to contemplate the atrocities, but I would like to better understand why and how they occur.

On the free day I had (June 1st), I woke up at 3:30 am and left for Akagera National Park in the east, on the border with Tanzania. I went with Juan Carlos Guitaqui from Rosario University in Colombia, driven by Louis, a 31-year old, former RPA soldier who is very entrepreneurial, owning the Toyota 4x4 with which he takes tourists to national parks. We arrived at the park a bit after 6 am, and took a guide (Charles) after paying the entry fee (of less than \$40). We saw zebras, wild pigs, water bucks, impalas, other species of antelope, giraffes, buffalo, baboons, monkeys, hippos, and many species of birds. We went up the hills, on campsites, with magnificent views of Lake Ihema, the Akagera river and the surrounding countryside, all the way to Tanzania. (Lake Ihema means Lake “Tent” because the British explorer Stanley pitched his tent next to it.) We went down to the temporary fishing settlement by the lake. Fishermen had come back from night fishing and were cleaning the tilapia and catfish they had caught. The boats are narrow and wooden (and appear flimsy). The fishermen had a fire over which they were boiling tilapia and making cassava (no vegetables). They looked extremely poor and fishing is not without risks; one of their lot was killed by a crocodile about a week before under circumstances I didn’t exactly understand. (The Park ranger/guide related the story laughing in a way that was difficult to understand; it was almost like he was rooting for the animals in the park against the humans. By the way, otherwise, the professionalism

and dedication of the park staff was impressive.) In the same settlement, there is a wooden boat shed in which an extremely slick powerboat about 40 feet long waits customers from the Akagera Lodge which is up the Hill with magnificent views (\$150 a night). It costs \$400 to take the boat for a ride. On the way back, going through the Eastern Province, I got the impression that the people and the housing were even poorer than those of the Southern Province that we observed on the way and back to Butare.

The five days I spent there felt more like a month. The impressions I had could be the strongest I've had from all the places I've ever visited and my mind is still spinning, both as a social scientist and as a human being.