



# Genocide in Rwanda

Rwanda, a central African country, had been a Belgian colony. The Belgians divided the people into various ethnic groups – the Hutu, Tutsi and Twa – and gave preference to the Tutsis, who were a minority group. Identity cards were issued, a practice that continued even when independence was gained in the 1960s. Although intermarriage was common, the perception of who was Hutu and who was Tutsi remained.

The Hutus gained control of the country after independence, and a more extremist group of Hutus worked to seize power. By reminding Hutus that Tutsis once held power over them and forwarding a belief that Tutsis would one day try to take control again, the Hutus instilled a sense of fear. These fears were heightened when a group of Tutsis who had been refugees in Uganda began to return to Rwanda. This began a series of battles, and the United Nations (UN) stepped in to try to negotiate a ceasefire and peace agreement. When the president of Rwanda's plane was shot down in 1994, the extremist Hutus called for other Hutus to murder the Tutsis within Rwanda. They had been preparing for this opportunity through the use of hate radio, formation of militia groups (*interhamwe*) and the dispersal of machetes. Starting in April 1994, within a three-month period, more than 800,000 people were murdered because of their ethnic identity. Women were systematically raped. Moderate Hutus who attempted to help their fellow Rwandans also were murdered. Many sought refuge in churches, feeling asylum would be granted, as the majority of the country was Christian. Instead, many churches became sites of mass murder. The killings ended when a Tutsi army, the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), seized control.

Although UN forces led by General Romeo Dallaire had been in Rwanda at the start of the killings, they were prevented from acting by the organization. Many Western countries recalled their citizens through an emergency airlift. Many diplomats, like the United States' then-Secretary of State Warren Christopher, refused to call the actions "genocide" for fear the United Nations Genocide Convention would require greater action. These actions, and the silence of the world despite many news reports of the killings, led the extremist Hutus to act with a feeling of impunity.

A criminal tribunal was established by the UN, and for the first time, rape was recognized as a tool of genocide. The work of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda continues to this day. A more traditional form of justice, known as *Gacaca*, has also been implemented to help combat the backlog of cases and bring a sense of justice for all who acted in the genocide. In 1998, U.S. President Bill Clinton visited Rwanda and apologized for not acting at the time.

## Resources on This Topic

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### Books:

- Shake Hands with the Devil" – Gen. Romeo Dallaire
- "Machete Season" – Jean Hatzfield
- "Leave None To Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda" – Alison des Forges
- "We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families" – Philip Gourevitch

### Web sites:

- <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/ghosts/>
- <http://www.kigalimemorialcentre.org/old/index.html>
- <http://www.yale.edu/gsp/rwanda/index.html>
- <http://www.rwanda-genocide.org/index.html>

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