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Monday, May. 16, 1994

Why? the Killing Fields of Rwanda

By NANCY GIBBS

"There are no devils left in Hell," the missionary said. "They are all in Rwanda." Actually they brought Hell with them; you have only to watch the rivers for proof. Normally in this season, when the rains come to these lush valleys, the rivers swell with a rich red soil. They are more swollen than ever this year.

First come the corpses of men and older boys, slain trying to protect their sisters and mothers. Then come the women and girls, flushed out from their hiding places and cut down. Last are the babies, who may bear no wounds: they are tossed alive into the water, to drown on their way downstream. The bodies, or pieces of them, glide by for half an hour or so, the time it takes to wipe out a community, carry the victims to the banks and dump them in. Then the water runs clear for awhile, until men and older boys drift into view again, then women, then babies, reuniting in the shallows as the river becomes the grave.

Aid workers have guessed that anywhere from 100,000 to 500,000 Rwandans have died since the civil war between the Hutu and the Tutsi reignited a month ago. But no one knows how many -- and we may never know. The bodies not rotting by the roads are buried in mass graves or floating down the rivers, far away from the arithmetic of history. With this latest tragedy in its long litany of tribal massacres, Rwanda joins Angola, Sri Lanka, Liberia, Bosnia and Nagorno- Karabakh in defining what barbarism means in the late 20th century, and defying the rest of the world to try to do something about it.

For the past month, anyone watching the two unimaginable dramas playing out in Africa was left wondering which one was prophecy. "We have moved from an era of pessimism, division, limited opportunity and turmoil," declared Nelson Mandela after he took his turn to vote an end to three centuries of racial hatred. "We are starting a new era of hope, of reconciliation, of nation building." All

across South Africa the people lined up to cast a ballot to escape from their past. All along Rwanda's borders and into the instant refugee camps, they lined up to escape from the future.

"I see two ends of the spectrum in Africa today," says Professor Crawford Young, Africa specialist at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, "the most depressing in Rwanda and the most hopeful in South Africa." In South Africa optimists find a jubilant example of the victory of democracy that the end of the cold war has ushered in. But out of Rwanda come warnings about how other struggles may unfold in this next dangerous generation.

Unless led by a hated tyrant, a country that loses its head of state by violence often goes a bit mad. In Rwanda the madness was spreading even before the night of April 6, when the plane carrying President Juvenal Habyarimana and his neighboring head of state Cyprien Ntaryamira from Burundi was shot out of the sky over the capital of Kigali, plunging into the gardens of the presidential palace. Habyarimana was a Hutu who had grabbed power in a coup in 1973 and worked hard to hang onto it. He was on his way back from a peace conference in Tanzania that was meant to end years of struggle between the minority Tutsi and the ruling Hutu. Instead, with his death, the fighting turned into massacre after massacre after massacre.

The Hutu instantly blamed the Tutsi rebels of the Rwandan Patriotic Front for the death of their President. Within minutes after the crash, soldiers of the presidential guard, who most resisted any sharing of power, took to the streets along with mobs of drunken young men and began hunting down Tutsi civilians, killing them where they stood. Western nations quickly whisked their nationals to safety, leaving terrified Rwandans to fend for themselves. As the tales of murder began to filter out, it became clear that there were no sanctuaries: blood flowed down the aisles of churches where many sought refuge; five priests and 12 women hiding out in a Jesuit center were slaughtered. A Red Cross ambulance was stopped at a checkpoint, the six wounded patients dragged out and bayoneted to death. Toddlers lay sliced in half, and mothers with babies strapped to their backs sprawled dead on the streets of Kigali. The fighting was hand to hand, intimate and unspeakable, a kind of bloodlust that left those who managed to escape it hollow eyed and mute.

Beneath the killing frenzy, something more systematic and sinister was happening. Moderate members of the Hutu government, those who had favored making some accommodation with the Tutsi, were among the first to be hunted down. Acting Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana and other Hutu ministers died within the first hours of fighting. "At first the killing wasn't purely ethnic. It was also political," says Desire Habyambire, a Hutu moderate who fled Rwanda with his three children after his name was circulated on a hit list. "I am caught in the middle," he adds. "Extremism is my enemy. If I meet a Hutu extremist, he will kill me. If I meet a Tutsi extremist, he too will kill me."

Like many refugees, Habiyaire thinks hard-line Hutu are trying to consolidate power by enlisting Hutu civilians in the fight not just against the rebel front but against all Tutsi. "They are trying to confuse people for their political ends, and they have succeeded." Augustin Nigaba, who is in charge of a major checkpoint on the border with Burundi, agrees. "First it was politics," he says. "Then it was genocide."

The hate campaign did its job; relief workers and refugees agree that much of the most vicious killing was done not by the army but by Hutu death squads, called the interahamwe ("those who attack together"). These are young men in street clothes, armed with anything from a screwdriver to an Uzi to a machete, a dull gleam in their eyes and a whistle around their neck. If one spotted a Tutsi family emerging from hiding and trying to flee, he blew his whistle, and his comrades sealed off any escape. "If you look in their eyes," says Daniel Bellamy of the U.N. High Commission for Refugees, who has encountered these killers at numerous roadblocks in the capital, "there is something there that is not in the eyes of normal people."

Relief workers tried desperately to help where they could, but the fervor of butchery grew too powerful, and people were dying too fast. Prison inmates were ordered to collect the corpses piling up in every corner of the capital. They came with Caterpillar tractors and shoveled the bodies into mass graves, sometimes thousands at a time. Without water or electricity and afraid to venture out for food, civilians huddled in their homes listening to the screams as soldiers moved from house to house, slaying whomever they found.

Thousands of Tutsi who took refuge in the Kigali sports stadium were bombarded by grenades and mortar fire. U.N. refugee officials said that each night, armed Hutu with lists of professionals and intellectuals would arrive at the stadium, haul out dozens of Tutsi and execute them in a kind of intellectual ethnic cleansing. Last week 21 orphans and 13 Red Cross workers trying to guard them were murdered: in a scene reminiscent of Nazi Germany, the children were picked out of a group of 500 simply because they looked like Tutsi. There were reports that several priests giving refuge to local Tutsi were buried alive. The mayor of the southern town of Butare, who is married to a Tutsi, was offered a Sophie's choice by Hutu peasants: he could save his wife and children if he gave up his wife's family -- both her parents and her sister -- to be killed. He made the deal.

The population grew so desperate that in a single 24-hour period, a quarter of a million people streamed across the border into Tanzania, creating an instant city, the second largest in the country. Some were Tutsi, but many were Hutu who feared that the rebels, now controlling much of eastern Rwanda and threatening to capture Kigali, would exact revenge for the massacres. One U.N. peacekeeping official,

however, observed last week that "the Tutsi have shown remarkable restraint -- there's been no ethnic cleansing in the Tutsi areas. They are not doing the kind of killing that the government is doing." In all, about 1.7 million Rwandans, out of a population of 8.1 million, have fled their homes. Most remain within the country, dodging the army, the gangs or the rebels, streaming along roads carrying clothes in plastic bags, mattresses on their heads. Last week, as the numbers of refugees continued to swell, U.N. officials were desperately trying to sustain the horde.

Early on there was already a winner in the war, whose triumph will be unaffected by whatever the politicians or soldiers decide. It is the victory of disease. Sanitation is impossible; typhoid, dysentery, cholera are all menacing the refugees, especially the children. Malarial mosquitoes swarm above the swamps. As the rainy season continues in the mountains, the dry cough of pneumonia and tuberculosis echoes through the camps. One Red Cross doctor has commandeered a partly built breeze-block structure and roofed it with blue plastic sheeting to make a hospital. More than 70 patients with bullet wounds and 100 others with horrendous machete gashes are presented at surgery each day.

The Red Cross doctor has personal worries as well: he too is a refugee. "I was living with my wife and four children in Kigali but had to leave them behind when I fled a month ago," he says. "For the past two weeks I have ^ telephoned my house, but there is no reply. Already I think of them as dead. Every one of our neighbors had been killed. I have put them out of my heart." He had three sons and a daughter, all under seven years old.

Yet so far, despair has not triumphed completely. Relief workers are astonished by the cohesion and sense of community they see around them. In some cases whole villages moved together and reassembled themselves in the camps; the elders ration food supplies; some priests are presiding over congregations 1,000 strong. For those who have been witness to mayhem throughout the past four years of civil war, there were even words of relief. Compared with the life he had left behind, one refugee told a reporter from ABC, "here we are tasting the good life." At least here, he explained, no one was being killed.

How did so much hate accumulate in so small a country? Historians could point to Rwanda as a case study in what happens to a former colony when suppressed tribal rivalries are released into a power vacuum. It is a familiar lesson: an estimated 1 million Hindus and Muslims died in communal fighting after the British pulled out of India; the departure of the Belgians from the Congo set off savage ethnic-regional warfare; the collapse of the Soviet Union ignited a murderous rivalry between Abkhazians and Georgians for control of Georgia. Rwanda's preindependence history held special ironies: while colonial rule was far less strict in Rwanda than in South Africa or Rhodesia, the legacy of Belgian rule all but guaranteed the violence that has erupted.

Europeans who stumbled into Rwanda a century ago found a country ruled by tall, willowy Tutsi cattle lords under a magical Tutsi king, while darker-skinned, stockier Hutu farmers tended the land, grew the food, kept the Tutsi clothed and fed. They lived in symbiotic harmony. "They were a reasonably contented rural society," says Basil Davidson, a leading British historian of Africa. "There was no hatred between the two groups. That came only with the colonial system."

First the Germans and then, after World War I, the Belgians ruled their African colony indirectly. Based on their notions of racial hierarchy, the Belgians upheld the dominance of the Tutsi, with their lighter skin and aquiline, almost European features, as their agents governing the majority Hutu population. Sometimes they gave the Tutsi privileged access to education; a minimum height was set for the sons of chiefs who wanted to go to school, which effectively disqualified many of the shorter Hutu. The Tutsi received the best jobs in the bureaucracy, even as the colonists drained the wealth from the country. "That really began to stratify society," says John Lamphear of the University of Texas, an East Africa expert, "creating differences that hadn't been there."

The years of colonialism essentially destroyed the social and political structures that had kept tribal peace for centuries. By 1959 the aggrieved Hutu majority rose up in rebellion; in some villages, machete-wielding gangs set upon the Tutsi and hacked off their feet, cutting them down to size. The Belgians, pushed by the wave of independence sweeping the continent, abruptly abandoned their Tutsi agents and sided with the Hutu majority. Having inflamed the Hutu's resentment of the Tutsi elite, the retreating colonizers left the minority to the mercies of the mob. Thousands of Tutsi fled into exile in Uganda, where they waited for the next 30 years for the chance to reclaim their power.

By the time the Belgians ceded independence to Rwanda in 1962, the foundations for slaughter had been laid. "When there is a rupture of authority, that creates a situation that is apocalyptic by nature and leads to fear and anguish," says Professor Francois Constantin, head of the East Africa Research Center at the University of Pau in France. "In Rwandan society, the fault of an individual becomes the fault of a group. A whole family is held responsible for a prejudicial act committed by an individual and can be eliminated. In a traumatic situation, fear and uncertainty can lead to collective murder. Vengeance breeds countervengeance."

As its hold on power was challenged by better-educated Tutsi rivals, the Hutu government increased ethnic tensions by creating a sense of tribal solidarity -- a useful distraction from the internal power struggles among northern and southern Hutu. All Rwandans were required to carry racial-identity cards; there was talk of herding Tutsi into certain regions, an apartheid imposed by blacks on fellow blacks. Any effort by Tutsi to reassert themselves met with a vicious and murderous response. "There was bludgeoning of public opinion," argues Philip Reyntjens, professor of law and politics at the University of

Antwerp in Belgium. "Ethnicity does not necessarily have to give rise to violence, but one can easily manipulate ethnicity to throw people against one another."

When it suited his purposes, President Habyarimana could behave like a model multiculturalist. By the late 1980s his economy was gasping, famine was spreading, and his hold on power looked increasingly fragile. In a gesture of reform he loosened controls on the press and began negotiating to allow competing parties into the government. But many thought he was still dragging his feet. In 1990 the exiled Tutsi of the Rwandan Patriotic Front invaded from Uganda and launched a civil war that came to a halt only last August with the Arusha accords, which mandated that power be shared. Tutsi would finally be allowed into a national-unity government, and a new army of both Hutu and Tutsi soldiers would enforce the peace.

The prospect of reconciliation was too much for Hutu hard-liners, and the plotting began. Well-connected residents of Kigali knew something awful was coming and began sending their children out of the country. What looked at first like a spontaneous eruption of ancient ethnic hate appears now to have been carefully planned. Though no one has been allowed in to investigate, U.N. officials suspect the hard-line presidential guard as being behind the assassination.

If the Rwanda catastrophe was more than a simple tribal meltdown, it also showed signs of being the kind of conflict that scholars warn will haunt the world for decades to come. These wars are not started by statesmen or fought by armies or ended by treaties. The tribal skirmishes recall the wars of the Middle Ages, when religion and politics and economics and social conflicts all messily intertwined.

Missing too is the hygienic, high-tech, buttons-and-bombs warfare that developed countries have spent the past 40 years refining. The chosen weapons are often far more crude. In Rwanda, says the U.N.'s Bellamy, "it is man to man, flesh against flesh. It is a human hunt; one man butchering another with his own hands." Distinctions between soldiers and civilians become harder to make and less respected. There are no rules of engagement and no one reliable with whom to negotiate. The Hutu army chief of staff guaranteed safe passage to U.N. soldiers evacuating wounded Tutsi civilians. But soldiers along the road stopped the convoy, ordered people out and set upon them with machetes. "They said they didn't take orders from the army chief of staff," said U.N. spokesman Abdul Kabia.

Absent any discipline, warfare becomes an extension of crime by other means. The modern military model is the neighborhood gang, brothers and cousins, roaming, rule breaking, terrorizing. "Youth has no future in Rwanda," observes Jean-Claude Willame, professor of African politics at Belgium's Catholic University of Louvain. "To a certain extent, they don't give a damn about those Hutu and Tutsi things. They're paid."

From Iraq to the former Soviet empire to the Balkans, the authoritarian state exists as a piece of machinery, man-made, breakable, the borders etched by diplomats ignorant of or indifferent to ancient claims and tribal hate. Kurds fight for their freedom from Iraq and Turkey; Tamils battle Sinhalese in Sri Lanka; Armenians fight Azerbaijanis in Nagorno-Karabakh; Albanian Muslims and Serbs circle each other in Kosovo. Last week Yemen was the latest country to break apart, as those in the south accused the northerners of attempting to further impoverish them. The struggles can be ancient and visceral, religious and racial, the oppressed against the oppressors. Where the valves of democracy allow for ethnic pressures to escape, differences are settled by discussion; in the embattled outposts of the new world order, it is the tribes that rule, and the nature of war and peace in the next century may be largely determined by their ambitions.

Rwanda serves as a modern laboratory for anyone trying to figure out which factors will matter and which will not in the pursuit of peace and security. It is a crucible full of explosives that nations watching from a comfortable distance have no idea how to handle. War itself is redefined when it is waged within countries rather than between them; when the environment -- soil, water, scarce natural resources -- become the spoils that cause neighbors to kill neighbors; when economic development fails to guarantee stability; and above all when ethnic enemies use the outbreak of fighting to settle scores that can stretch back for centuries.

With reporting by Clive Mutiso/Northwest Tanzania, Andrew Purvis/Bujumbura, Thomas Sancton/Paris and Ann M. Simmons/Washington

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