

15 years after the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, why we must never forget

By Grace Kwinjeh

Where to start? – Alice Ishimwe’s story

Teenage girl Alice Ishimwe is 15 years old. She was born during the Genocide in circumstances later explained to her: ‘from the story I was told, I was born between gate 16 and gate 17 on May 1, 1994, inside this stadium where my parents were seeking refuge.’ Her parents later died leaving her fate to well wishers and caregivers.

Alice is among those who had the courage to stand up during the days of the 15th Genocide Commemorations to tell her story. Her story is similar or mirrors testimonies of thousands of other survivors.

They give harrowing details of how they had to lie among dead bodies to escape death, of multiple rapes and how they helplessly watched loved ones get slaughtered.

During this mourning period, one is therefore at pains as to how to start writing a story on such pain and anguish that tells it as it is — a story that does not deviate from Alice’s face as she recounts her ordeal.

A story that does not drown in the waves of negationism/revisionism. Re-writing history – a glimpse of the revisionist/negationist movement.

The human rights agenda, Does Alice fit in?

“The figure of 800,000 is so enormous, so daunting, that it runs the risk of becoming a statistic... we must remember that each of the 800,000 individuals who died in 1994 had their own story, their own family, and their own dream, “USA President Barak Obama, 2009.

The month of April is a somber one in Rwanda. Rightfully so this is the month that Rwandans commemorate the Genocide, keeping the memory of those who perished alive. Every word written or spoken during this period has certain meanings attached to it.

This why I will dwell on a particular article published during the mourning period, as it gives a contextual basis in the articulation of some of the problematic positions advanced by Genocide revisionist/negationists.

At the height of the 15th Genocide Commemorations, the Director of Human Rights Watch, Kenneth Roth, published a rather mocking if not provocative article given the timing of publication and the title, ‘The Power of Horror in Rwanda.’

Giving a very pedestrian view of politics in Rwanda, Roth comes out as someone who enjoys bar gossip than actually looking at facts on the ground, in his postulation of the situation prevailing in Rwanda today. I tried to find little Alice's face in the article, her story, her human rights, all were missing.

Disturbing however, for a Director of an international organization that champions the human rights cause, is the seemingly lack of emotion, the dryness, the lack of empathy towards those aggrieved by the Genocide at their time of mourning.

One would not want to deny him the right to express himself, but the human rights discourse in the 21st century should at least be framed in a context where even the tears of those you detest are not celebratory material.

This makes his analysis incisive for our broader understanding of some of the international bodies that give credence to revisionist/negationist views of the Genocide.

Firstly, the topic (The power of horror in Rwanda) and timing of Roth's article is not coincidental but actually exposes sinister attempts aimed at undermining the present Rwandan Government.

Secondly, tied to the above is how Human Rights Watch is one of the organisations that have sought to sanitise the negationist movement, by laying legitimacy to claims and arguments made by a motley group of people many of whom otherwise should belong behind bars for crimes of Genocide.

It is instructive therefore to see how the timing of Roth's article and its title, feeds into many of the notions advanced by the revisionists, all which is not coincidental, as this paper concludes.

In global politics, the human rights agenda remains a contested one for many reasons, making Roth's position on Rwanda a perfect starting point in arguing how exploitable this agenda can be to the advancement of the most retrogressive agendas.

The way that agenda is framed also crudely mirrors the power relations within the global context, leading to serious polarization.

Take the attempts for instance by the International Criminal Court to indict Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir, or the vindictive application of the Principle of Universal Jurisdiction in the French Judge Bruguiere's indictments against senior Rwandan officials.

Roth in his article penned at a deeply emotional time for Rwandans, deliberately seeks to change the subject from their history, their plight and suffering to laying credence to revisionism.

And so while he acknowledges the great economic progress and development by the Rwandan government, he suffers selective amnesia as to how good governance is the main ingredient for economic growth.

Here we can pick the anti-corruption drive, participation of women in nation building leading in both the private and public spheres, among many which Roth deliberately leaves out in his analysis.

The real danger in letting organizations use moral authority derived out of humanity's common struggle for all fundamental freedoms, for them to exclusively own and interpret these aspirations for us defeats the purpose of those collective struggles.

Pointing to another danger in Roth's articulation of the Rwanda Genocide in that his analysis is devoid of the years of struggle against repression in Rwanda before the Genocide; that many in the current leadership suffered the most horrendous human rights abuses in the politics of exclusion practiced by the government then.

They suffered as exiles or inside the country; under the watchful eye of many bodies or groups such as HRW. They also won against the odds, which only diminishes detractors' moral authority to comment on post - Genocide Rwanda.

Put simply, had there been strong human rights advocates in Rwanda at the time, then perhaps the Genocide would have been avoided.

What was it like then for Rwanda's leadership before the Genocide? Many often forget that Rwanda suffered waves of pogroms in the 50's and 60's which drove hundreds of thousands out of the country.

The memory we are systematically fed on is of the Genocide from July 1994 -- the history beyond that - erased. For decades the Rwandan people were left at the mercy or to the whims of foreign countries namely – Belgium and France.

Notwithstanding that the Genocide itself is a culmination of those decades of abuse and neglect of the very human rights Roth and others today claim to champion.

Again in tackling issues to do with the Genocide ideology which was so deep rooted in the minds of a people, who went through years of brainwashing, training in hatred, in murder, one has to rise above theory and see the practical side.

The Genocide ideology ingrained in the minds of many was taught in schools, churches, homes, the impact of which are a million dead bodies, we still mourn to this day. The mass mobilization to hate and kill has a historical basis, and therefore must be dealt with within that context.

The genocide ideology therefore is not a gospel that was just preached overnight, which the present Rwandan government can just uproot; its eradication should be at the core of nation building initiatives, given that it was the main ingredient used to destroy a whole society.

Given that there was a whole programme over decades of instilling it, then the same energy and resources must be put in place to remove it, otherwise there is no moving forward.

Roth's analysis consists of a dangerous blackmail that does not seek to address fundamental issues to do with unity and reconciliation in a constructive manner.

The tragedy being some of these arguments give legitimacy to Genocidaires and fugitives from justice hiding in Europe and America.

Even more disheartening is the attempt to undermine the Gacaca courts, but then it is no secret that the HRW and other organizations, dismissed these even before the first case was heard, and so it is a matter of a self fulfilling prophecy- we told you they will not work, they have failed.

A conclusion again reached without authentic evidence from the ground but simply hearsay.

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