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Genocide? 'I Deny the Lot'

By Alex Duval Smith

PARIS — The woman regarded by many as an architect of genocide is on the verge of tears. Agathe Habyarimana has been driven to despair by a prosaic reality of everyday life in France. Stateless, without so much as an ID card to show at the post office, an alleged mastermind of the Rwandan massacres is living an administrative nightmare. 'I am so disappointed. I thought this was the land of asylum and human rights,' she said after hearing on Thursday that, 13 years after France's military saved her life, its refugee officials have turned her down on appeal.

In a rare interview granted to The Observer in her Paris lawyer's office, Habyarimana, 64, flanked by four of her sons, pre-empts questions: 'It's all lies. I deny the lot.' Glued to her chair, her hands on her lap, she avoids the word 'genocide' to describe the killing of 800,000 Rwandans in 1994, stumbling over her syllables to produce a mumbled 'jonocide'. Her 21 years as first lady ended on 6 April 1994 when the jet carrying her husband, President Juvenal Habyarimana, was shot down over the capital, Kigali. Three days later, this Hutu noblewoman was spirited out of the country by the French military, leaving behind a bloodbath which survivors claim had been planned by her and her associates at least since 1992.

'How could it have been? Can you imagine me making deathlists on 6 April when I was in the garden of our Kanombe home, in darkness, picking up debris of my husband's plane that were raining from the sky? They were firing at our home. All I could do was cry and pray. My daughter Jeanne phoned the French embassy to ask them to get us out. It took the French three days.'

Habyarimana, who lives with her son Bernard, 34, in a villa in the Paris suburb of Courcouronnes, argues that her innocence was established by French judge Jean-Louis Bruguiere in a 35-page report released last year that prompted Rwanda to sever diplomatic relations with France. It found that the jet was shot down under orders from Paul Kagame, then the leader of the Tutsi-dominated rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) which had been at war against Habyarimana's regime since 1990. Judge Bruguiere called for Kagame to be brought before an international tribunal and issued arrest warrants against nine serving officials.

'They used to say that I shot down the jet. Now that the French have accepted that I didn't, they cannot ignore that the whole thing was planned by the RPF, that I am a victim and that my husband was a peacemaker,' she said.

Habyarimana, whose six children in France have refugee status or are nationals, denies that she headed a hate cell of extremist Hutus called Akazu (the small house) or 'le clan de madame'. She claims to have had no role in politics and denies that she led a lavish

lifestyle. 'These are inventions by the RPF. Long in advance, they spread these lies to cover their own crimes. My role was to be the first lady. I was busy looking after housekeeping and my husband. I also had charitable works. I used to visit the elderly and I was patron of several orphanages that I used to visit. I was involved in a women's sewing group. We went to the hospital with children's clothes. We tried to help the unfortunate. Occasionally when my husband was travelling abroad, other first ladies wanted me to come along, so I did.'

After fleeing Rwanda, Habyarimana spent several years travelling between the Central African Republic, France, Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), Kenya and Gabon. She was given a fake Gabonese passport and then a Zairean passport and Marshall Mobutu Sese Seko arranged for her husband's remains to be buried near his palace in Gbadolite.

'Wherever we went we had the RPF's agents after us. One of my sons died in 1998 in Kinshasa. His heart could not stand the stress. That is when I finally came to France. The RPF and their people are continuing their killing. Four million people have died in the Kivus (DRC) but you don't hear about them. The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) is victor's justice—you have to win to be heard.'

This where Habyarimana—who tops Rwanda's 'most wanted' list—has a point. She is not wanted by the tribunal but she is cited as an accomplice in the continuing case of her brother Protais. Tribunal officials say they considered bringing charges against Habyarimana but refrained from doing so because many witnesses of her crimes are dead.

Two weeks ago, an Australian former investigator for the tribunal told the BBC that he was ordered by the United Nations to end his investigation into the downing of the presidential jet. No reasons were given but it is widely believed that the present Rwandan government would not have cooperated with the tribunal had there been suggestions of RPF implication. Amnesty International has criticised the incomplete justice of the Arusha-based tribunal, whose mandate ends in 2008 and claims that at least 60,000 Hutus were killed.

'Hutus, Tutsi and Twas (the smallest ethnic group) all suffered because of the RPF,' says Habyarimana. 'When they invaded in 1990, they massacred everybody. There were Tutsis in the RPF who broke away and killed Hutus and there were Hutus who killed Tutsis. Before 1990, Rwanda was in peace. I have a brother who has had four wives, three of them Tutsis. I had Tutsi friends, I still have, we phone each other.'

Habyarimana's battle for a pale blue refugee passport will now move on to the State Council, France's highest legal authority. Even though French foreign ministry officials took care of her in 1994 the support has dwindled.

Habyarimana says that she has no contact with the French government. Yet it is unlikely that any other country will have her.

'I chose France. This is the land of justice and human rights. The truth will come out in the end and it will triumph.'

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