

At the Heart of Rwanda's Horror

General's History Offers Clues to the Roots of Genocide

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NYANGE, Rwanda -- She remembers the days when her brother, the army general, landed his "bird machine" in this hilltop village. In his dashing uniform and beret, he ordered up a new house for her, a new house for their mother and rounds of Rwanda's golden beer, Primus, for their childhood friends.

"It was like my brother was king," said Maria Mukako, her three children clinging to her as flies buzzed around their bare feet. "Now I hear on the radio that people are saying my brother is more like the devil."

Her brother, Augustin Bizimungu, former chief of staff of the Rwandan army, sits with 53 others in a detention center in Arusha, Tanzania, awaiting trial by the U.N.-mandated International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. He is accused of being an architect of the state-sponsored genocide that killed more than 800,000 people.

Over 100 days in 1994, after the assassination of President Juvenal Habyarimana, Rwanda's Hutu majority carried out the organized slaughter of the country's Tutsi minority and Hutus who sympathized with them. Under Bizimungu's command, soldiers exterminated the "cockroach Tutsis" on a scale so massive that eight years later, just about every Rwandan has a parent or sibling -- or both -- who was raped, buried alive or hacked apart with a machete.

"He's one of our most important arrests," said Kingsley Chiedu Moghalu, legal adviser to the tribunal. "Bizimungu was in a very important position, leading the troops and giving out weapons. He had the power to stop the killing. That's about as high and as important as you can get."

The masterminds of many of the 20th century's horrific mass killings are widely known: Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin, Pol Pot. Yet the authors of the Rwandan genocide remain relatively anonymous.

In dozens of interviews, Bizimungu's relatives, friends and former army colleagues described a man immersed in conflict. During the genocide, he veered from alleged atrocities to opportunistic charity, one moment allegedly ordering massacres and rapes, the next protecting Tutsis' lives in exchange for truckloads of beer.

In many ways, the roots of the genocide appear in the outlines of Bizimungu's life. And those who know him see in his personal history and that of the country keys to explaining how even ordinary Rwandans -- mayors, teachers, priests and children -- came to participate in acts of horror.

Calm Claim of Innocence

Bizimungu was arrested in early August in Angola, where he had taken refuge among demobilized units of the UNITA rebels.

By Aug. 21, he was sitting in an air-conditioned, brightly lit courtroom in Arusha, dressed in an ocean-blue suit and a white shirt, listening to the charges being laid against him. It took 2 1/2 hours. When the reading was finished, he pleaded not guilty in a calm voice.

The indictment against Bizimungu describes several incidents where he either ordered killings or turned his back on those who asked for help. There were 10 counts of genocide, conspiracy to commit genocide and crimes against humanity.

On April 7, 1994, Tutsis and moderate Hutus poured into a military camp in the northern town of Ruhengeri. Some knew Bizimungu, who had been stationed there in the early 1990s. He was a frequent customer of local bars, and continued to visit the town after his promotion.

"Augustin Bizimungu ordered his subordinates to expel these civilians," the indictment reads. "Two civilians begged Bizimungu for help. They were executed within minutes." The prosecution further alleged that from Aug. 10 to 15, 1994, Bizimungu rounded up fleeing Tutsis in a Ruhengeri courthouse. Soon after, armed civilians massacred the group.

Bizimungu has not yet selected an attorney. And because of the backlog of cases at the U.N. court, he won't be brought to trial for about a year. But his temporary counsel said Bizimungu was a victim of politics.

"Does he deny that he was chief of the army? No? But he is like Milosevic -- he is the victim of politics," said attorney Bharat-Bhushan Chadha, referring to the trial underway in The Hague in which former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic is defending himself against genocide charges. "Bizimungu's army attacks a population. How can he have control of everyone when there was no control?"

Chadha said Bizimungu seemed serene in the detention center here. "When I see him, he smiles," Chadha said, shrugging his shoulders. "He is calm. He knows they are trying to blame him."

Friends in High Places

Rwanda has long been called the country of a thousand hills. Now it is also called the country of a million dead souls. It is about the size of Vermont, but contains 12 times as many people. Nearly every curvy slope is a plot for cultivating food in a lush green country that looks like an enormous quilt of gardens.

Deep in these dense and impoverished hills is the village where Bizimungu grew up. In the village there is a huge home that looks as alien as if it were a middle-class American ranch house, sitting five miles up a mountainside with no roads nearby.

The home belonged to Felecien Kabunga, a rich tea farmer and a distant cousin of Bizimungu's family. Kabunga shunned Bizimungu's father for being weak and sick, relatives said. After Bizimungu's father died in 1976, his mother was left with six children. Bizimungu was the oldest son, living literally in the shadow of Kabunga.

The village, in the Byumba precinct near the border with Uganda, is among the poorest in Rwanda. Homes have no running water. Teenagers are the size of younger children because of malnourishment. Although Tutsis were killed there during the genocide, Hutus and Tutsis had lived side by side in relative peace for years, villagers said.

Bizimungu grew up dreaming of winning over Kabunga, his sister and neighbors said. And in the older man he found a willing patron.

"Bizimungu's family didn't even own cows," said Jean Claude Shiqimpuno, a neighbor who is considered the village historian. "He didn't like himself. He wanted a big house and big authority."

As the oldest son, he was the only child his mother sent to school. But he was more interested in sports. Graying and 50, he still has a stocky, athletic build.

"At first he wasn't interested in school. He had to do his first year over," said Andre Bakunzibake, who is still a teacher in the village's tiny Rushaki primary school. "Later, he was a good student in the military in Belgium."

Neighbors and friends say it was Kabunga who secured Bizimungu's entry into military school in Belgium, the colonial power in Rwanda. The two men would stay in touch. Kabunga, who was related by marriage to the president's family, pressed for Bizimungu's advancement in the army, eventually having a voice in his selection as chief of staff, officials said.

Kabunga was an ardent anti-Tutsi, neighbors said. He is currently a fugitive accused of participating in the genocide.

In military school in Belgium that anger at Tutsis among Hutu cadets was reinforced and flourished, with the cadets advocating ridding themselves of the Tutsis, neighbors said. Bizimungu's sister said he didn't take such things seriously, but neighbors said he would have done anything to be successful and to stay in power, even if it meant killing.

On the knobby dirt streets of Ruhengeri, Bizimungu's name evokes fear, even today. When he was the local commander, he was known to make speeches about the unfair power of the Tutsis.

From late 1990 to 1994, Bizimungu and other military leaders conspired to build what they called a "Machiavellian plan," according to the indictment, that would keep Hutus in power over

the Tutsis, a historical struggle in Rwanda, where the tall, angular-faced Tutsis were favored by the Belgian rulers.

During the revolution of 1959, at the end of Belgian rule, the Hutus rose to power in a peasant revolt and thousands of Tutsis were killed or fled to Uganda. In the early 1990s, when rebel Tutsis of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) launched attacks, the Hutu government began planning a campaign to kill all Tutsis.

Bizimungu was part of that planning, which consisted of fanning ethnic hatred and violence, distributing weapons to militiamen and preparing lists of people to eliminate, according to the U.N. indictment against Bizimungu.

The plan was discussed around Ruhengeri, but some people found Bizimungu's actions more confusing than his words. He drank with Tutsis. His driver was a Tutsi. And he often joked with friends that there are "a few cockroaches I like."

Still, he led meetings in Ruhengeri in January 1993 at which he addressed his troops. "The enemy is known, and the enemy is the Tutsi," he was quoted as saying by residents of Ruhengeri who heard the speech. The indictment in Arusha tells an identical story.

Brutal and Obedient

On April 7, 1994, the sounds of slaughter spilled out over Rwanda's capital city. Roadblocks were set up with armed soldiers. Lists of Tutsis were compiled. Constant radio announcements commanded Hutus to kill their longtime antagonists. Troops scoured the city, rounding up Tutsis and killing them.

Nine days into the genocide, Bizimungu was promoted from major general to military chief of staff. Army sources said Kabunga had stepped in again, pushing for his appointment.

Bizimungu replaced a man who was said to be neither brutal nor obedient enough. Bizimungu proved to be both.

Under his leadership, the young Hutu Power forces became infamous for atrocities such as cutting fetuses out of pregnant women, burying children alive and gang rapes in which the victim died of her wounds, of sheer terror, or both.

Bizimungu traveled between Ruhengeri, where he ordered specific butchery, and Kigali, the Rwandan capital, according to both interviews with survivors and the U.N. indictment. "The plan was to exterminate the civilian Tutsi population so [Hutus] could remain in power," the indictment states.

Even so, several Tutsis were close to Bizimungu, including his driver, who survived the massacre.

While it was going on, Bizimungu developed a relationship with the manager of the Hotel des Mille Collines, Kigali's only haven for Tutsis and moderate Hutus. Truckloads of beer were traded for protection. Bizimungu wanted to keep his troops happy during the slaughter. And he wanted to nurse his own drinking habit.

Twice he stepped in to save the Tutsis in the hotel, according to interviews and a Human Rights Watch report.

In late April, as international opinion and Tutsi-led troops, known as the RPF, began to descend upon Rwanda, Bizimungu took the threat of a weapons embargo seriously. He went on the radio and urged ethnic fighting to be stopped but also said: "Stand side by side and help the government forces fight the enemy, the RPF."

"Bizimungu's pressure was to keep his army armed and going," said Alison DesForges, a Rwandan historian who wrote a Human Rights Watch report on the genocide. "The variations in his behavior don't necessarily reflect any kindness or benign personality. He asked for ethnic fighting to stop when he was worried about losing ammunition. He was a military man and he was concerned with winning the war. But it was too late."

In May, a U.N.-mandated arms embargo was put into place against Bizimungu's troops. Their stocks were not replenished.

On July 4, with the army collapsing, RPF forces captured Kigali and are still in control. More than a half-million Hutus fled to what is now Congo. Bizimungu went with them and continued to lead his Hutu Power troops from there.

A Break in the Case

Arusha is a town of sunny, California-like days, cool nights and staggering views of Mount Kilimanjaro. In Arusha, Bizimungu waits in the U.N. detention center, the first of nine genocide suspects to be arrested after the State Department announced on July 29 that it would pay up to \$5 million for information leading to their arrest and transfer to Arusha.

Analysts say his arrest is important to the stabilization of the region and to ending the war with Congo. While in Congo, Bizimungu formed the rebel Army for the Liberation of Rwanda, made up of Hutu Power forces.

The rebels tried to seize control in Rwanda in 1997-98 and again last year. There is edgy hope for peace between Rwanda and Congo's government. Rwanda is pledging to disarm and repatriate the Hutu militiamen blamed for the massacre. In turn, Rwanda said it has begun to withdraw 1,600 of its estimated 25,000 troops from Congo.

But for his family and for the survivors of genocide, there is the same question: Will Bizimungu receive the justice he deserves?

"Do you know what Bizimungu means in our language?" asked Eveste Gendahimana, a neighbor of his sister, as he leaned forward and whispered. "It means, God Knows."

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