Opinion: Rwanda heals after one of history's worst genocides

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A procession carries a small flame of remembrance on the 20th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide on April 5, 2014.
Photo: AP

KIGALI, Rwanda - On April 7, 1994, the genocide began against Rwanda’s Tutsi minority people. Genocide is the mass killing of members of a national, ethnic, racial or religious group. Though countries around the world saw this genocide and were capable of helping, they did nothing. These brutal killings took the lives of more than 1 million people. Many in my own family died.

In 2014, the 20th anniversary was painful for Rwanda, but we owed it to the victims and survivors, and to ourselves, to explain the events of 1994 honestly. The genocide against the Tutsi was not a sudden attack by warring African tribes, but was a planned campaign by the Hutus who ran the government against Tutsis. They did it to gain more power.
Genocide Was Not Defeat

Race hatred between Hutu and Tutsi populations was a poison injected into Rwanda’s bloodstream by European rulers during colonization of the country. They labeled people either Hutu or Tutsi and favored the Tutsi over the Hutus. It eventually led to the genocide and brought us to our knees. But it did not defeat us.

Rwanda faced great challenges after the genocide. The government of laws had collapsed. The court system was unable to do its job. There was little money to support the government. There was no trust between people because they were shocked and afraid. Armed Rwandan groups roamed the country to “finish the job.”
For good reason, the world expected Rwanda to fail as the violence continued. However, we began to root out the ideas and feelings that led to the genocide. This was – and continues to be – our great national project. We work to end old ideas that divided us.
A Country’s Right To Be Free

How should we remember the genocide today? How should we prevent the tragedy from happening again in Rwanda, or anywhere in the world?

First, we support the “Responsibility to Protect” principle of the United Nations. It is a commitment for countries to agree to prevent genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. It is true that a country’s right to be free and have its own government is important. But the right to live is even more important for the survival of all countries.

That is why, in 2014, Rwanda sent 850 troops to help the Central African Republic. Rwandan forces also took part in the United Nations Mission in South Sudan. As part of the United Nations, we continue to support Syrian civilians that suffer under their government.

Protection, As Well As Punishment

Second, we must improve the protection of people before armed conflicts occur. This is also part of the “Responsibility to Protect.” Armed groups, that are not part of a country’s army or police force, threaten citizens. We must, therefore, work together to improve the training of military and police forces. Only when every country learns to protect its people will progress be made.

Third, we need to be sure that where tragedies occur, the guilty are punished for their crimes. Slow-moving courts like in the United States or Europe could not possibly handle the number of cases, so Rwanda turned to our own traditional community courts called Gacaca courts.

More than 2 million genocide cases were heard. By allowing survivors to seek justice and the guilty to seek forgiveness, the Gacaca courts have worked. Once again, there is trust. Rwandans today, killers and survivors, live side by side peacefully.
The causes and consequences of genocide are everywhere. We must not hide them, deny them, or forget them. The world's response to the unfolding slaughter in Rwanda was to withdraw, and countries should remember their moral and political failure. The lessons are too important, especially for people facing hatred and violence today and in the future.

**Stripping Away Labels For Unity**

Twenty years is a short time in the life of a country. But today, Rwandans are confident and face the future with optimism. While many challenges remain, our country is making progress and we are reaching our goals. More than 1 million Rwandans have lifted themselves out of poverty in the last few years. Life expectancy has doubled in the past two decades.

Most importantly, Rwandans have thrown away dangerous labels that divide us between Hutus and Tutsis. Now we have a united national identity built around the values of self-reliance, hard work, and, above all, dignity. There is no greater way to end hatred and conflict than the belief that the future offers progress.

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