Opinion: Rwanda is reborn following genocide past

By Louise Mushikiwabo, Project Syndicate, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.17.17

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KIGALI, Rwanda - On April 7, 1994, the horrors of genocide began against Rwanda’s Tutsi minority group. Genocide is the mass killing of members of a national, ethnic, racial or religious group.

The world saw what was happening and, though capable of helping, looked away. The most brutally efficient killing spree in history took the lives of more than 1 million Tutsis and others. I count many in my own family among them.

The 20th anniversary in 2014 was painful for Rwanda, but we owed it to the victims and survivors, and to ourselves, to explain the events of 1994 honestly.

Decades Of Simmering Tensions

The genocide against the Tutsi was not a sudden attack by warring African tribes, but a planned campaign by the government, led by Hutus, over decades to dehumanize Tutsis and gain more power.
Race hatred between Hutu and Tutsi populations was a poison injected into Rwanda’s bloodstream by the Belgian and German governments when they controlled and colonized Rwanda. It led to genocide and brought us to our knees, but it did not defeat us.

It is impossible to overstate the great challenges Rwanda faced after the genocide. The government of laws had collapsed and the court system was unable to do its job. There was little money to support the government and no trust between people because they were shocked and afraid. Armed Rwandan groups roamed the country to “finish the job.”
Leaving Old Ideas Behind

For good reason, the world expected the nation of 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, as we work to end old ideas that divide us.

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

**Three Keys To Prevention And Recovery**

First, we support the United Nations’ “Responsibility to Protect” doctrine. It is the cornerstone upon which countries agree to act 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. When we held a seat on the U.N. Security Council for two years, we supported Syrian civilians that suffer under their government.

Second, and related to the "Responsibility to Protect," we must improve the protection of people before armed conflicts occur. 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 ensure that where tragedies occur, the guilty are punished for their crimes, because this restores trust. Slow-moving courts in U.S. or European style could not possibly manage the high number of cases, so Rwanda turned to our own traditional community courts,
called Gacaca courts. More than 2 million genocide-related cases were heard. By allowing survivors to seek justice and the guilty to seek forgiveness, the Gacaca courts have worked. Rwandans today, killers and survivors, live side by side peacefully.

**Past Moral And Political Failures**

The causes and consequences of genocide are everywhere. We must not hide them, deny them, or forget them. The world, whose response to the unfolding slaughter in Rwanda was to withdraw, should remember its moral and political failure. The lessons are too important, and the stakes too high, especially for populations facing systematic discrimination and violence today and in the future.

Twenty years is a short time in the life of a country, but today, Rwandans face the future with optimism and unwavering determination. While many challenges remain, our country’s progress has been undeniable. Strong and consistent economic growth has allowed more than 1 million Rwandans to lift themselves out of poverty in the last few years. Life expectancy has doubled in the past two decades. We are on course to achieve the U.N.’s Millennium Development Goals of ending hunger and poverty, and improving medical care, education and the environment.

**Belief In The Future**

Most important, Rwandans have discarded dangerous and ethnic labels that separated us as Hutus or Tutsis in favor of a unified national identity built around the values of self-reliance, hard work, and, above all, dignity. There is no greater antidote to hatred and conflict than the well-grounded belief that the future offers progress and possibility.
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