

France indicts president of Rwanda

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Almost 13 years after the genocide that engulfed the central African state of Rwanda, the spark that triggered the massacres remains a topic of much controversy.

On April 6, 1994, two missiles blew the plane carrying Rwanda's President Juvenal Habyarimana out of the skies, killing all on board, including the President of Burundi and Rwanda's army chief of staff.

The shooting down of the presidential jet seemed to act as a signal, so that by 9:15 the same morning roadblocks had cordoned off the capital of Kigali, and the slaughter of the minority ethnic group, the Tutsis, began. It is estimated that up to a million people were butchered, approximately one in seven of the population, over 100 days. The Rwandan regime, based on the majority Hutu ethnic group, was fully complicit in the mass killings.

In an ongoing court case in France to investigate the crash, instigated by the families of the crew who piloted the Falcon jet, presiding Judge Jean Louis Bruguière accused Paul Kagame and nine Rwandan officials of being involved in shooting down the plane.

Kagame is the current President of Rwanda and former leader of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) that swept into Rwanda from its enforced exile in Uganda in 1994, driving the Hutu regime and the perpetrators of the genocide into exile. Without revealing his evidence, Bruguière, who is a leading anti-terrorist judge in France, called for arrest warrants to be issued against the nine officials and said he would be writing to the United Nations demanding Kagame be brought before the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) to answer the charges.

The Rwandan government retaliated by severing all diplomatic ties with Paris, recalling its ambassador to France and sending the French ambassador packing.

This is not the first time Kagame and the RPF have been implicated in the assassination of Habyarimana, nor will it be the first time the UN has been asked to investigate the plane crash.

Two years ago, an article in the Canadian *Toronto Post* cited intelligence pointing to the culpability of the RPF with the backing of a "foreign power"—in all likelihood the United States. The US did indeed arm and train the RPF. And, with the ousting of the Hutu government, went also French influence in the region—displaced by a regime favoured by the US.

Toronto Post also alleged that the UN suppressed the leaked intelligence. In response to requests to investigate the crash, the UN claimed that the ICTR was set up to try perpetrators of genocide and not to investigate who or what power lay behind the plane crash.

There is much speculation as to who was behind the death of the Rwandan president. In March 2004, *Le Monde* revealed leaked interim findings of the Bruguière investigation. It reported that the missile launchers involved in the crash had been discovered and identified as part of a batch bought in Moscow in 1987 and supplied to the Ugandan government, which was harbouring the RPF.

However, Bruguière, whose investigation has now lasted eight years, cited as his informants former Rwandan Colonel Bagasora, as well as French mercenary Paul Barril. Bagasora was an advisor to the Interahamwe militia, who were central to the butchery, and it was known that he wanted to see the Arusha peace deal between the RPF and Hutu government scuppered. Barril was closely associated with Habyarimana's widow Agathe, who was herself involved with Hutu extremists.

The objectivity of Bruguière's report has also been greatly undermined by two witnesses called to support it. Deus Kagiraneza, a member of Rwanda's pro-Hutu government prior to the genocide, described the report as an attempt to exonerate "the Genocide planners and hide France's role in the genocide of Tutsis."

Another witness, Emmanuel Ruzigana, has described what was attributed to him in the report as lies.

If the truth is ever revealed, and it turns out that the RPF, backed by the US, did fire the missiles, this would not diminish the shared responsibility of France for the genocide. As more and more evidence is leaked revealing the intimate ties between France and the leaders of the genocide, the French ruling elite are trying to deflect world attention away from their role and onto the RPF.

France's ties with Rwanda go back to the 1970s when it took over from Belgium in continuing the tactic of divide-and-rule to suppress the population. Whereas, before World War II, rule was through a Tutsi elite at the expense of the Hutus, this was reversed after the war in favour of a layer of the Hutu population. This state of affairs set in train a turbulent history both under colonialism and after independence, marked by ethnic conflict and killing on both sides. This situation was

mirrored in neighbouring Burundi where (as in Rwanda before the advent of colonialism) the mainly pastoral Tutsis and agricultural Hutus had lived side by side peacefully and intermarried.

In her book *Conspiracy to Murder*,* Linda Melvern details the close relations between French imperialism and the regime that carried out the genocide. France was Rwanda's biggest supplier of arms and sent French troops into Rwanda in 1990 to repel the RPF, which had invaded from Uganda. In the three years of civil war that preceded the genocide, the French military often took command in the field. At the time of the mass killings, 47 high-ranking French officers were embedded in the Rwandan army. In April 1994, French-trained officers from the Presidential Guard eliminated members of the political opposition and figures who supported the Arusha Accords peace agreement. The French also trained the Paracommandos and Reconnaissance battalion that, as soon as the presidential plane plunged to earth in flames, began killing anyone with a Tutsi identity card.

According to Melvern, there is evidence that French military personnel also trained the Hutu extremist Interahamwe militia, and French officers were in commando-training centres where torture was perpetrated. First on the scene after the air crash were French personnel.

A government-appointed commission of inquiry is sitting in Rwanda to decide if there is sufficient evidence of French complicity in the genocide to file a suit against Paris. One ex-militia member came forward to testify that French troops transported hundreds of Interahamwe to the Bisero Mountain area to kill Tutsis seeking refuge there. Another witness claimed French soldiers stood by and watched the murder of 50 Tutsis at camp Gysenyi military barracks in northwest Rwanda. Other witnesses claimed French soldiers committed rape, while yet another said he had participated in transporting weapons from a French plane to be used in the massacres.

The UN played its usual role in Rwanda, as a mechanism for advancing the competing interests of rival imperialist powers. Both France and the US, in their role as members of the UN Security Council, vetoed the implementation of the 1948 Genocide Convention that would have allowed the UN force UNAMIR to be expanded. UNAMIR was charged with acting as a police force in Rwanda at the time of the genocide, under the Arusha Accords.

UNAMIR commander General Romeo Dallaire had repeatedly requested more troops with a mandate to protect the thousands of terrified people holed up in churches and schools. But in 1994, the UN did nothing that would have possibly provoked a conflict with its member states, and was complicit in allowing a massacre to take place while the US and France competed over which would hold sway in Rwanda through a Hutu-based client regime.

It was only in the aftermath of the mass murders, when it was apparent that the RPF were overwhelming the Rwandan army,

that the French sent in troops with the backing of the UN. They did so to provide a safe escort out of Rwanda to the perpetrators of the genocide. This was known as Operation Turquoise. Tens of thousands of Hutus, including 37,000 troops, fled before the advance of the RPF into neighbouring Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo), where the Hutu extremist militias continued to terrorise those in the refugee camps. The ringleaders were flown to France or Belgium, where they enjoy immunity today. Despite all the evidence, France still denies its role in the genocide and puts the casualties down to the civil war.

In 1998, on May 1, Jean Kambamba stood before the ITCR in Tanzania and pleaded guilty to genocide, offering full cooperation in return for protection for his family. Kambamba was prime minister of the Rwandan government that was supposed to give way to a power-sharing regime with the RPF, but instead directed the genocide. He informed the tribunal that Habyarimana had been warned by President Mobutu of Zaire not to attend a meeting in Dar-Es-Salaam on April 6 to secure the Arusha Accords. It was on the return journey that his plane was shot down.

Mobutu's source was a high-ranking French official. On April 7, a senior French official, Francois de Grossouvre, who worked for President Mitterand as an advisor on African affairs, committed suicide after learning about Habyarimana's fate. And a French lawyer representing the widow of the Falcon's pilot said there was evidence implicating people in France who knew what was going to happen, but did nothing to stop it.

There is yet another explanation offered by Collette Braeckman, the African Editor of *Le Soir* in Brussels. Braeckman received a letter from someone called Thadee who claimed to be a militia leader in Kigali. According to this contact, two members of the French Detachment d'Assistance et L'Instruction, clad in Belgian uniforms, had launched the missiles, acting on behalf of the extremist Hutu political elite. French academic Gerard Prunier cites witnesses who saw white men on Masaka hill from where the missiles were launched on April 6. Prunier believes that Habyarimana was too moderate for the Hutu extremists who wanted him out of the way.

What is not in doubt in this tangle of intrigue is that imperialism created the conditions whereby the government of Rwanda, backed by the French, was able to mobilise large sections of the Hutu population to embark on a policy of wiping out all the Tutsis.

* *Conspiracy to Murder: The Rwandan Genocide*, Linda Melvern, Verso, New York, 2004



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