

Rwanda: Government report documents French role in 1994 genocide

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On August 5, the Rwandan government in Kigali released a 500-page report detailing France's role in the anti-Tutsi genocide carried out by a French-backed, ethnic-Hutu government in 1994. Based on French sources—President François Mitterrand's recently published personal papers and TV and press accounts—as well as on testimony by Rwandan witnesses, the report presents extensive evidence of active French collaboration with those planning and carrying out the massacres.

The report's findings are broadly consistent with the findings of official French investigations into the genocide, but it also explicitly names high-ranking French politicians as responsible for the Rwandan events and presents detailed testimony alleging direct French military involvement in the atrocities. The report implicates 33 French politicians and army officers involved in the genocide and calls for them to face trial. Among those named are the late President François Mitterrand and his son Jean-Christophe, then-Prime Minister Edouard Balladur, then-Foreign Minister Alain Juppé and his chief aide, Dominique de Villepin, who went on to become prime minister in 2005-2007.

The 1994 massacres took place as Rwanda faced a devastating economic recession due to the massive, IMF-mandated devaluation of its currency and the collapse of world market prices for coffee—its main export crop. It also confronted an invasion by the US-backed, Tutsi-based Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). In April 1994, after Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana died when his plane was shot down over Kigali, the government began broadcasting radio appeals to *Interahamwe* militias, recruited largely among unemployed Hutu youths, to carry out massacres of Tutsis. From April to July, the

Interahamwe and related militias killed an estimated 800,000 people, both Tutsis and Hutu opponents of the government.

French elite forces—including 2,550 ground troops and air support—flew into Goma, in eastern Zaïre (now Democratic Republic of the Congo), and marched westward into Rwanda. Their goal was not to stop the massacres, however, but to bolster the government against the invading, US-backed RPF.

The current report, which was released in hard copy in Kigali and distributed to media outlets, found that French forces repeatedly collaborated with governmental forces in atrocities against Tutsis. According to Kigali's *New Times*, which secured a copy, the report stated: "French soldiers were involved in assassination of Tutsis and Hutus accused of hiding Tutsis. French soldiers committed many rapes against Tutsi women survivors. These sexual abuses particularly targeting Tutsi women survivors were systematic; in other words, frequent, tolerated, and a product of the standards and practices of the institution to which the men who committed them belonged."

According to the *New Times*, the report also documented French collaboration with killings and ethnic cleansing, writing: "French troops adopted a scorched earth policy. They ordered local authorities in the three prefectures of Cyangugu, Kibuye, and Gikongoro to encourage the Hutu population to flee simultaneously to Zaire en masse. They also clearly requested to have Tutsi who had infiltrated the displaced population camps brought to them and to have *Interahamwe* kill at least some of them. At different places in the three prefectures, they let *Interahamwe* kill Tutsi under their eyes."

A 337-page draft of the report, released in November 2007, was posted online by the news magazine *Le*

Nouvel Observateur. In addition to substantial historical material drawn from French and Rwandan governmental archives, it provided hundreds of pages of press accounts and eyewitness testimony, gathered in meetings held in several different cities in Rwanda, of atrocities committed or sanctioned by French troops.

According to one witness, “During the genocide, at the end of June 1994, the French arrived at Nyarushishi where they installed their positions. All around the Nyarushishi camp, there were roadblocks kept by *Interahamwe* and policemen. To come to Nyarushishi, the French had to cross the roadblocks. One day, three youths were found in a tea plantation by the *Interahamwe* and ran towards the camp, pursued by the *Interahamwe*. They even managed to enter the Nyarushishi camp. The police commandant came in and took them away. The French were watching and did nothing. We never saw the three youths again.”

A former *Interahamwe* member testified, “We also killed Tutsis who left camps to look for firewood, including Sembega's son Charles. After killing them, we threw them in a mass grave near the roadblock. French troops came to see what we were doing and said we were real military men. As a reward they offered us combat rations. They also came along on our night patrols.”

The November 2007 draft also contained lengthy allegations of sexual assault by French troops against Rwandan civilians.

Despite the atrocities documented in these reports, the French government has refused to make any apologies and the Rwandan government has until now refrained from using the evidence to indict French politicians. Rwandan Justice Minister Tharcisse Karugarama told the *New Times*, “This is a report of inquiry; it is not a criminal file. It is not a statement of guilt but on the basis of this report, other things can follow. We do not want to use this report as a comprehensive statement of guilt.”

Some French officials more directly named in the current report have attacked it openly. Alain Juppé, who was foreign minister in 1994, referred to a text published on his blog on January 27: “In the last several years we have seen an insidious attempt to rewrite history. This attempt seeks to transform France from an engaged actor into an accomplice to genocide. It is an unacceptable falsification.”

Current Defense Minister Hervé Morin, who was in 1994 an aide to then-Defense Minister François Lyotard, called the report's findings “absolutely intolerable” and chillingly added that French soldiers had “nothing to feel guilty about.”

For now, the French government's official response is to try to bury France's role in the genocide by ignoring the report. The French Foreign Ministry called the report's accusations “unacceptable,” but it said that it wanted to continue to improve ties with Rwanda. “France is still as determined as ever to build a new relationship with Rwanda, transcending this difficult past,” it added.

France's center-left daily *Le Monde* commented: “Everyone has received the word: don't make waves.... Summer vacation has allowed the French authorities to do as little as possible, and Franco-Rwandan news will be diluted by the Beijing Olympics. The executive has decided that the Quai d'Orsay [Foreign Ministry] will give the only official reaction, in its daily press briefing.” It quoted Kouchner's aides, who said: “We don't want to give the impression we're taking the report too seriously, to avoid starting a polemic.”

Negotiations are ongoing between French and Rwandan officials. Last December, President Sarkozy had a meeting with Rwandan President Paul Kagame in Lisbon, Portugal. He forcefully expressed “France's strong desire for reconciliation and also its concern to face up to the weaknesses and errors of the international community, including France, in the face of the Rwandan genocide.” French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner went to Kigali in January 2008. A Franco-Rwandan working group met three times in the past year to negotiate the resumption of official relations between Kigali and Paris.



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