The EastAfrican
Magazine
JANUARY 19-25, 2009

Pastor Déo Gashagaza leads a congregation in prayer. The cleric, who returned to Rwanda in 1995 to discover that his sister and her family had all been murdered, regularly goes into the prisons to visit and console people. Picture: Sarah Bones

RWANDA'S AMAZING RECONCILITION

Killers living alongside their victims

Mbyo village, with its pretty homes made of bricks, surrounded by lush banana groves, children playing happily in the sun, appears an idyllic community, writes *Beatrice Spadacini*, till you learn the history of its residents

UNDER THE SCORCHING MIDDAY sun, the daunting orange iron gates of Rilima Maximum Security prison swing wide open. We enter the penitentiary with a mixture of trepidation and curiosity. Hundreds of men in bright pink and orange uniforms are gathered inside. They wear short-sleeved blouses and baggy pants that are cut off below their knees. They look like schoolboys. Instead, they are prisoners, the majority of whom are convicted of crimes against humanity.

The men are everywhere in the open courtyard. Some are crouched on the floor; others stand in row after row; a few have climbed up on to walls; many are sitting on wooden benches. There are 3,900 prisoners crammed in a space built for 750.

We walk through the crowd to the sound of drums and baritone voices. A chorus of extraordinary strength encircles us. It feels surreal to be inside a prison in Rwanda. One cannot avoid thinking about many of these men being members of the Interahawame, the militias responsible for brutally murdering hundreds of thousands of Rwandans during the 1994 genocide.

I can see these men brandishing machetes and spiked clubs, drugged up and thirsty to hunt down their fellow men and women who happen to be Tutsis or moderate Hutus. Now we are in the midst of them, accompanied by Pastor Déo Gashagaza, a priest who returned to Rwanda in 1995 to discover that his sister and brother-in-law and their four children had all been murdered.

He, a member of the Tutsi ethnic group, goes into the prisons to visit and console people who only 15 years ago were eager to slaughter him. His courage and devotion are remarkable.

Most of these men have been in prison for at least 10 years. Mattias, the prison warden, told us that 285 of them are in for life. It was only 18 months ago Rwanda scrapped the death penalty, a move intended to bring back for trial into the country many of the planners of the genocide who are now under arrest in comfortable prisons in Western capitals or at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in Arusha, Tanzania. The rest of the prisoners have convictions ranging from one to 30 years.

The thudding of the drums gets louder and louder. The air is filled with energy. As soon as Pastor Déo takes the podium, he is transformed.

Divine energy, as he calls it, rattles through him. He shouts, "Hallelujah!" and raises his hands to praise the Lord while waving his Bible in the air. His voice rises with the heat. The prisoners are euphoric. Someone is there to lead them into prayer. A human being cares enough to come and visit. It is much more than a religious ritual. It is an act of humanity.

Standing next to Pastor Déo on the podium is another prisoner, an ex-pastor himself, most probably one of the many religious figures who succumbed to the call of death during the genocide and brought worldwide shame and condemnation upon the

CONTINUED ON PAGE II

CONTINUED FROM PAGE I

church in Rwanda. But now they stand side by side, united in their spiritual journey of redemption for the prisoners of Rilima.

Three large buildings at Rilima are for the men, while a fourth is reserved for women prisoners. Out of the almost 4,000 prisoners at Rilima, 145 are women. The quarters are separated by a small iron door. As women, we are allowed into the female section of the prison. In a few seconds, we are surrounded by young and old women carrying handmade baskets, woven purses and other handicrafts.

Dozens of children make their way through the crowd, swirling amid the skirts and taking their places in the front row. Children of women prisoners in Rwanda can stay with their mothers until they are of school age. Here, too, Pastor Déo offers consolation through prayer.

AFTER LEAVING THE PENItentiary, we head for a place where victims live side-by-side with former Rilima prisoners. We cross the Nyabarongo River, the same river that during the genocide was filled with floating bodies of innocent men, women and children. I am aware that dead bodies floated all the way into Uganda. The river zig zags through papyrus marshes. It is here that thousands of people hid from the marauding militias.

Pastor Déo is excited to be taking us into one of three experimental reconciliation villages in the country that fall under his Prison Fellowship Ministry, where former prisoners who confess their crimes and ask for forgiveness are now living side by side with survivors of the 1994 genocide. Some Diaspora Tutsis who have returned from many years of exile in neighboring countries also live there.

On our way to Mbyo village we pass Nyamata Church, one of the country's most important genocide memorial sites. The commune of Nyamata extends over 15 hills. Around 50,000 Tutsis out of a total population of 59,000 were murdered here between April 11 and May 14, 1994, the date of the arrival of the Rwandan Patriotic Front troops.

Mbyo village consists of 45 households. These are not humble structures made of mud and iron sheets. They are pretty homes made of bricks, surrounded by lush banana groves and a space for cattle. There are shared water tanks, narrow paths from one house to the next and a walkway running through the middle of the village. Children are happily playing in the sun.

It is a peaceful, almost idyllic scene. You would think it an attractive place to live if you did not know the history of those who do reside here.

Aloise is one the residents of Mbyo village. He spent nine years in Rilima Maximum Security prison. He was assigned a home here in 2003 after confessing to the crimes he committed during the genocide in the Gacaca, the traditional court system that in Kinyarwanda literally means "justice on the grass."

This traditional system was reinstated by President Paul Kagame after the genocide as an attempt to decongest the prisons and process some of the more than 200,000 people who had been arrested. As a result, since 2003, more than 70,000 prisoners have been released and reintegrated back into their communities.

"I used to ask myself, how could we live together with people we hurt so much? There was a wall of separation between them and us. We started by sharing meals and with the help of God, it has been possible for us to live together. They agreed to forgive us. We were all in a similar position. We did not have homes. Everything had been destroyed."

The pain in Aloise's eyes is haunting. Living with the guilt is not easy. Sitting next to him is Janette, who must be in her early 30s. She is a genocide survivor. Her entire family was killed in April 1994. She was lucky to have found refuge in a church until the Rwandan Patriotic Front made its advance onto Kigali and people started to venture out of their hiding places.

"I was introduced to Aloise by the pastors," says Janette. "He had been freed from prison. I was afraid that he would finish me off. When we first met, we sat far away from one another. For the first few days, we heard the word of God. We began by making bricks together. Slowly, through the work done in the church, we warmed up to one another. He asked us survivors for forgiveness. In 2004, the village was completed. Now my children and his children play together."

IN SOME WAYS, EXPLAINS PAStor Déo, it is easier for ordinary people to forgive each other than their highly educated counterparts who often have stronger ideologies and beliefs. Ordinary Rwandans, especially those who live in the rural areas, are poor and lacking basics like shelter, food and water. Poverty is a powerful equaliser even in a society that has lived through deep and artificially instigated hatred and divisions.

The genocide memorial in Kigali is a place of mourning and healing. It is disturbing but emotionally manageable so that visitors can take it in slowly; feel the extent of the tragedy, what led to it and what it has left behind. From the outside, the memorial is more reminiscent of a chalet in the Swiss Alps than a site where the remains of thousands of people are buried and the memories of one of the most brutal and dehumanizing experiences on earth are carefully displayed.

Rwandans visit it regularly. On a Sunday, it is not uncommon to see people wandering around the circular halls of the museum, weeping silently, holding hands and staring at the images of death such as bits of clothing, machetes, spears and other rudimentary objects, wallet-sized photographs and lined-up skulls. The memorial, funded by the Aegis Trust, also highlights stories of courage, humanity and goodness to inspire and underscore the message that even in the midst of evil there is love and compassion.

These are the stories of ordinary people; one of them is Damas Mutezintare Gisimba who runs an orphanage in Kigali and saved over 400 people during the genocide.

Gisimba is a softspoken, gentle person who inherited the orphanage from his father and grandfather and humbly carries on the family legacy. There are now 186 abandoned children living at the Gisimba Memorial Centre. "Many people wanted to hide here because they thought their children would be safe. Sometimes the mothers also came along," explains Gisimba as he recalls details of the 1994 genocide.

I was afraid that he would finish me off... He asked us survivors for forgiveness. In 2004, the village was completed. Now my children and his children play together

"The killers tried to come in many times. The first time I gave them food. The second time I gave them money. Then I ran out of both and I was left with only words: 'These are just children,' I would tell them. 'Maybe they are your cousins. I take in everyone.' At times I would focus on someone who appeared to be more receptive until they all agreed to come back another day. We waited for death. We did not know when it would come, but we knew it would come."

One of the children who survived is 14-year-old Kevis, a slender boy approaching adulthood. His demeanour is reserved. "He was found on the back of his mom, still alive, by a Red Cross worker who brought him here. I knew all his relatives. When I tell him his story, he is relieved I knew his family."

Many of the children currently staying at the orphanage have been orphaned by Aids — many women who were raped during the genocide were infected with the virus. It was a known policy of the Interhawame militias to have men infected with HIV rape women during the 1994 genocide. According to a study conducted in 1999 by the Association of Widows of the Genocide, a government sanctioned body that operates across the country, 67 per cent of the widows interviewed were infected with HIV.

Other children staying at the centre are abandoned. The offspring of the 1994 genocide rapes were known as

Clockwise from far left: Janette is a genocide survivor. Her entire family was killed in April 1994. Today, she lives in peace and amity with neighbour Aloise, who spent nine years in Rilima Maximum Security prison for genocide crimes; An AVEGA widows' group weaving 'peace baskets' in Kicukiro District; Carol Karemera, who returned from Belgium in 1998, was last and is the director of Festpad, a pan-African dance and music festival; Assumpta Umurungi, executive secretary of AVEGA. All pictures: Sarah Bones

the enfants non-désirés (unwanted children) or enfants du mauvais souvenirs (children of bad memories). There are between three and five thousand children in Rwanda today who are the result of the genocide, and most of them don't know that they are children of violence. Some may even be at Gisimba's orphanage but there is no way of uncovering this well-guarded secret.

It is obvious that Gisimba is a man who will rarely say no to a plea for help. Maybe it all started when his ailing father asked him to take over the family orphanage back in the days when he was still a young man working in a factory. Even though he had two other brothers, Gisimba was the chosen one as he was the first-born. He heeded his father's plea and embarked on his life's work. Later he got married, had four children of his own and took in two orphans.

"One of the greatest challenges we face at the orphanage is not having enough money to pay for school fees while education costs keep getting higher," Gisimba says. The money he gets is mostly from donors, well wishers and a government fund created for orphans of the genocide that helps children go to school. "I also use my own money, as my wife and I own a little pub that we rent out. I take this work as my heritage. When I see my children turn into adults, finish school, get married and have a life of their own, I feel a lot of satisfaction. It gives me the courage to keep on going."

Education can be a ticket out of poverty, but it will take a generation or two before the benefits can be reaped. Like Gisimba, there are others who understand the importance of investing in the power of education for building a more prosperous and peaceful Rwanda.

RECONCILIATION IS NOT magic," says Anglican Bishop John Rucyahana, founder of Sonrise School in Musanze and chair of the Rwanda Prison Fellowship. "It is a slow and painful process that has many ups and downs. It is our reality and we must move forward. We don't have time to wait until all the healing has been done. We must dig with one hand and do the work while we wipe away our tears with the other."

The third time I meet Bishop Rucyahana is on the shore of Lake Kivu, in the town of Gisenyi, a walking distance from the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is at this same border the world finally took notice of Rwanda in 1994 as television screens filled hordes of Hutu refugees pouring into Congo.

Rucyahana is a man one cannot easily forget despite his trademark tinted shades that make eye contact difficult and photos a nightmare. The passion for his ministry goes hand in hand with the love for his country. His hearty laughter is periodically overshadowed by a serious discourse rooted in the history of Rwanda. He never tires of talking about the colonial past, the dates of the many exoduses of persecuted Tutsis, the hard life of being a refugee, the horrific stories of the genocide, the feeling of impotence and the deep, powerful urge to return to heal a broken nation.

He is adamant that, in order to understand what happened in 1994, one must grasp the history of the country and come to terms with it. He accuses the Western media of being ignorant and biased for portraying the genocide as a sudden episode, disconnected from the legacy of colonialism and the vicious cycle of hatred fuelled by ideologues.

"The world has refused to recognise the mathematics of the genocide," he says with conviction. "Every time Tutsis were persecuted since 1959, they lost the potential to reproduce, to offer a new generation to this country. What happened in 1994 was the fiercest, most demonic and blatant killing spree, but it was not the first time it happened."

At that time he was on a teaching fellowship in North America. When he saw images on TV of the bodies of people floating down the Kagera River towards Lake Victoria, he cut his mission short, returned to Uganda, selected 10 pastors and, "put them on a minibus for a journey to Rwanda. I wanted to see with my own eyes the impact of what had happened." With 800,000 people dead in a span of three months, he knew there was going to be a lot of work for him to do.

"Deep in my heart I knew that reaching out to the orphans was going to be necessary otherwise we would have lost yet another generation," he says as he stands in the middle of the courtyard of the Sonrise School, one of the many projects he has started since his return from Uganda where he spent almost 30 years in exile. "Here we fight the scourge of stigma by mixing children who are orphaned with others from well-to-do families. Our vision is to strive for academic excellence so that all the children can work towards rebuilding this nation."

The school, which opened in 2001, has more than 900 pupils attending primary and secondary classes. Three-fourths of them are orphans, robbed of their parents not only by the genocide but also by Aids. The school sits on top of a hill in Musanze, a town that marks the entrance to the Ruhengeri region, where gorillas abound and tourists bring in much-needed cash. The silhouette of a magnificent volcano fills the background.

The medium for teaching is English, an intentional departure from the traditional francophone orientation of academic institutions in Rwanda. "We need to free our younger generation from the colonial chains of the past and leap forward into the world of global business. I want the young people to exploit the Internet libraries of the world and be connected with a fast-moving market," says Bishop Rucyahana.

The bishop gestures to a young woman to come join us. Her name is Diane Karehe. She is 16 years old. The middle finger on her right hand is missing. She bears deep scars on her wrist and arm.

Diane was five years old when she was attacked by infiltrators from Congo. This was in 1997, after the genocide. More than 200,000 Hutus fled to neighbouring Congo when the Rwandan Patriotic Front made its advance into Kigali. Among them were many genocide perpetrators. Until the end of the 1990s, they regularly infiltrated Rwanda, carrying out attacks on survivors and continuing their killing mission. In that episode, Diane lost both her mother and brother.

"I have forgiven those who hurt me," she gently says. "What I have learned in this school has taught me how to forgive. I used to be very sad before coming here but now I just want people to make peace with one another and move forward. I would like to become a doctor." It is hard to imagine forgiveness in a situation of this kind, yet Diane and thousands of ordinary Rwandans are walking down that same path every day.

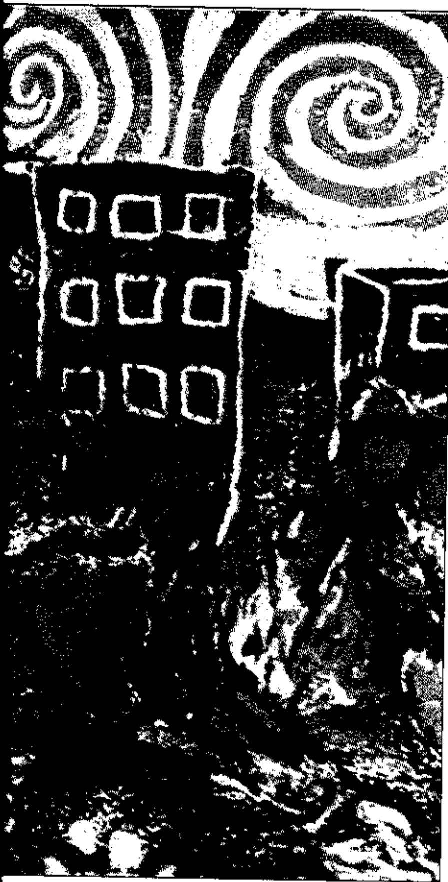
THE QUEST FOR ECONOMIC survival and dignity are at the core of many reconciliation initiatives in Rwanda. One of the better-known and most visible efforts is the Peace Basket project, which was officially spearheaded by AVEGA, the Association of Widows of the Genocide.

According to Assumpta Umurungi, executive secretary of AVEGA, a widow and one of the 50 founding members of the association, the term "peace basket" was coined after a member of the initial group travelled to Geneva to attend a peace conference in 1995. "When she offered the organisers a handmade straw basket from Rwanda, she told them to fill it with peace so that she could bring it back to her country," says Umurungi. Peace baskets can now be seen all over the country, on the shelves of boutiques in the capital city, in rural marketplaces and even in prisons.

Their light pastry colours and distinct pointed shape have become a symbol of post-genocide reconciliation while the project itself has taken on a life of its own and expanded way beyond AVEGA. A lucky break came when, for two consecutive years, they broke into the major US retail chain Macys.

"Working together promotes reconciliation," explains Sabine Uwase, advocacy

CONTINUED ON PAGE V



the environment with art in an attractive, accessible way."

THE DUTCH, WHO DO A GREAT deal to promote the arts in Kenya, are at it again.

As well as funding projects throughout the city, they are now offering residencies to artists who want to develop their skills in an international setting.

Twenty-five places are available worldwide each year at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam. The Rijksakademie offers 50 studios where artists can work for one or two years.

There they can pursue every medium and technique: Painting, drawing, graphics, photography, sculpture, video, film, sound and digital media.

They can also explore links with other areas, such as architecture, theatre, music, literature and science.

In addition to the studio, residencies offer help by technical specialists, plus a work budget, and assistance with accommodation and grants.

"Confrontation with diverse cultures and advice by internationally active artists, curators and others, promote the deepening, expansion and acceleration of artistic practice," said the Nairobi embassy spokeswoman, Marije Balt.

Applications close on February . They should be made online to www.rijksakademie.nl

E-mail: *fwhalley@gmail.com*

FROM PAGE III

officer for AVEGA, as we drive towards Kiukiro District to meet a group of women basket weavers. "Families whose relatives are in prison work side-by-side with those whose loved ones have been killed." Weaving baskets generates much-needed income for the widows, a fourth of whom are still homeless as a result of the destruction unleashed during the genocide.

From a group of 50 widows, AVEGA has grown to more than 25,000 members. Umurungi says that healing goes through different phases but that much depends on how busy a person is and how much time they have to think about the past. "I have no doubt that reconciliation can happen," she says, "but this is a slow process. Sometimes, you don't even know whom to forgive. Other times, you may meet people who are still hostile and this can set back the forgiveness process."

A LARGE CROWD IS GATHERED outside the well-lit Minister's Hall in one of Kigali's main squares. These are young and polished Rwandans, sons and daughters of the ruling elite who have studied abroad. They are multilingual, multicultural and university educated. Many were born in Western capitals after their parents escaped during the first exodus of Tutsis in 1959. They are eagerly anticipating the start of a play titled *Identity Card.*

These young men and women come to spend the European summers in Rwanda, witness the rapid growth of their country of origin and decide whether or not they want to try their luck here. They bring culture, theatre and the arts along with business ideas and contacts from overseas. They are a positive and energetic force in the country, albeit somewhat disconnected with the reality outside of Kigali and the traumas of the genocide. But they can adapt rapidly to serve the needs of a fast-growing economy.

Carol Karemera is one such young professional. She is a stunning javelin of a woman born in Brussels from Rwandan parents. Her mother fled Hutu-led persecutions of Tutsis in 1959 and later met her husband in Belgium where he was a student. Karemera studied jazz — saxophone and soprano — at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Belgium. She is also an actress, has a contemporary dance background and has worked in TV.

Karemera has performed in the widely acclaimed *Rwanda94*, a powerful six-hour play produced by Philippe Tashman and put together by Grupov, a Belgian experimental theatre group. The play reenacts the tragedy of the genocide and its impact on ordinary people. The play toured Rwanda in 2004 on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the genocide. "It was really intense. Thousands of people cried silently. It was one of the most powerful and difficult experiences of my life," she says as she recalls performances in Butare, Bisesero and Kigali.

In 1995 Karemera claimed her Rwandan citizenship and in 1996 made her first trip back. Two years ago she decided to move permanently to Rwanda. This year, she was the director of Festpad, a pan-African dance and music festival that has been taking place in Kigali every couple of years since 1998. Karemera feels strongly that art and culture have an important role to play in the healing of the nation. She believes artists have a responsibility to nurture and protect creativity in this new and fast-paced Rwanda.

"In my opinion," she says, "the genocide also happened because culture was eradicated. Through the arts we can create a vital space for feeling, reflecting and questioning. Art can help us share. People cannot carry so much sadness inside. We need to let this out."

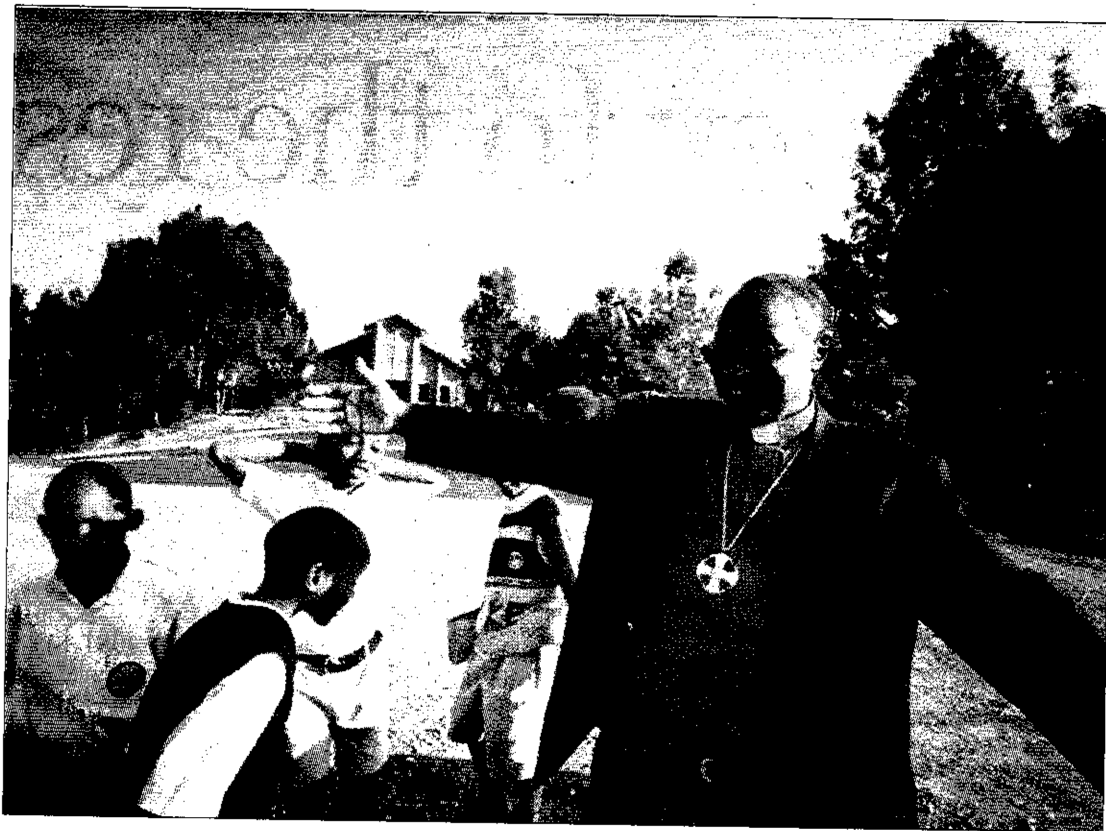
For this purpose she has established Ishyo, an association of women artists that aims to make culture accessible to everyone and, as she explains, "create a safe space for people to express their feelings." The three Bs is their first substantial project. It consists of Baracommandos or artist gangs that storm into classrooms and engage students in specific art projects; Bibliobus, a travelling library that serves over 1,200 children in Kigali city; and Ba-B'art, another art-focused initiative for young people.

PEOPLE OFTEN WONDER whether reconciliation is truly possible in Rwanda given the events of 1994. In my opinion, reconciliation goes hand-in-hand with healing and healing is not possible unless there is forgiveness. But the question is: can everyone forgive?

As Bishop John Rucyahana repeatedly said, "Reconciliation is not magic and it is painful." The reality is that the healing process is different for each person and what is happening at the national level is not necessarily in synch with what is happening on the personal level. A friend once told me that in Rwanda, there are many broken people walking around. He referred to them as "zombies."

Fatuma Ndagiza, the executive secretary of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission, knows this all too well. She acknowledges that the real challenge now is the healing of individuals, which takes place at different times and on different levels. It is important to note that Rwanda, unlike neighbouring Burundi, has not gone through a peace process per se.

President Paul Kagame came to power because he was the leader of the opposition and his forces defeated the regime that masterminded the genocide. In the country today, there is little overt opposition to Kagame's government. Because there has not been a negotiation process for sharing power, opposing views have not been articulated openly in the past 15 years. Many people carry grudges and are bitterly opposed to the current leadership. Some opposition groups are still in exile.



Top: Anglican Bishop John Rucyahana, founder of Sonrise School in Musanze and chair of the Rwanda Prison Fellowship: 'Reconciliation is not magic'; Above: Damas Mutezintare Gisimba who runs an orphanage in Kigali and saved over 400 people during the genocide.
Pictures: Sarah Bones

In Rwanda, unlike Burundi, talking about one's ethnic identity openly is illegal. Government policy underscores that everyone is Rwandan, which on some level makes perfect sense given what led to the events of 1994, but on another level this official policy denies people the legitimate dialogue about ethnicity that is long overdue and whose absence was most probably one of the root causes of the genocide.

The president's strategy focuses on economic development. When people are poor and their basic needs are not met, they are more likely to be ideologically manipulated. This is what happened during the genocide. Economic growth, if it trickles down to everyone, can lift people out of poverty and be an incentive for responsible citizenship. But this is a long-term strategy with many risks.

It is clear the process of forgiveness is not the same for the survivors as it is for the perpetrators, or for those who lived as refugees in exile and later returned. There are also those who feel wronged by the RPF soldiers or the current elite. They carry resentment inside.

But what is truly astonishing is how far the country has come since and the willingness of so many to embark on a process of forgiveness, healing and reconciliation. Will it take a lot more time? Of course. Will it be easy? Definitely not. Will there continue to be scepticism? Indeed. Can the world learn something from this tiny, landlocked nation in Africa that has gone through hell and come back? Absolutely.