

Sabbath Slaughter: SDAs and Rwanda

Did Adventist leaders help kill other Adventists? The International Criminal Tribunal at the Hague investigates.

by Alita Byrd

ACCORDING TO A SEPTEMBER 4, 1995, *Newsweek* report, a minister of the Seventh-day Adventist Church aided and abetted genocide in Rwanda. Elsaphane Ntakirutimana, an ordained Seventh-day Adventist minister in the province of Kibuye, and president of the West Rwanda field (an office comparable to that of conference president in the United States), is on a list of those presumed guilty of genocide that has been compiled by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. According to survivors and several human-rights organizations, Ntakirutimana was involved in the massacre that took place at the Seventh-day Adventist church in the village of Mugunaro.

African Rights, a respected human-rights organization based in London, accuses Ntakirutimana and his son, Dr. Gerard Ntakirutimana, of “active [participation] in the

genocide,” along with two other Adventists—Salomon Mpayamaguru, secretary-treasurer of the Gitwe Adventist Association, and Eziro Tabaro, a deacon. According to African Rights, Mpayamaguru is in detention in Gitarama, and Tabaro “is responsible for many deaths, including [those] of Adventist pastors.”¹

According to the *Washington Times*,² an investigator from the Hague came to the United States in September to look into Ntakirutimana’s case. Members of the Rwandan community in the U.S. report that Ntakirutimana is now living with his son in Laredo, Texas. He has not returned repeated phone calls or responded to fax requests from the *Times* to discuss the reports. Church officials have denied knowledge of his whereabouts.

According to a special *Adventist World Report* released in December 1994, at least 3,000 people died in the slaughter at Mugunaro, and close to 1,000 were killed at the Adventist university in Gitwe. In addition to accusations that certain Adventists aided the killers in both places, there is also evidence that Adventists

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risked their lives to save others.

Adventists are not the only religious figures accused of participating in the genocide. In a country estimated to be 90 percent Christian, many professed Christians and their church leaders were involved in the killing. Priests, nuns, and pastors of various faiths have been accused of crimes, including providing names of Tutsis and Hutu moderates to be eliminated. Clergy even betrayed the hiding places of people fleeing death.

Most of the published evidence against Ntakirutimana and leaders of other denominations—including the reports in *Newsweek* and the *Washington Times*—draws from research done by African Rights, whose work is being used by the International Tribunal at the Hague. In 1995, Rakiya Omaar and Alex de Waal, directors of African Rights, published a revised edition of *Rwanda: Death, Despair, and Defiance*, a 1,200-page report on the 100 days' genocide that began on April 6, 1994. The evidence, based on scores of interviews with refugees conducted during and after the genocide, varies in quality and must be examined carefully. But although it may not yet be conclusive, it is deeply disturbing.

An international war crimes tribunal finds the evidence sufficiently credible to name Ntakirutimana as a suspect of mass murders. "The tribunal is investigating what happened in Kibuye, and Elsaphane Ntakirutimana is on the list of persons presumed guilty," said Alain Sigg, spokesman for the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. At the time of publication, this tribunal, connected with the International War Crimes Tribunal at the Hague, has indicted two individuals, held in Zambia, and eight others whose identities have yet to be revealed. All eight, currently outside Rwanda, are implicated in killings in the region of Kibuye. Consequently, the tribunal's strategy is to present the evidence to the countries concerned in the hope of encouraging the suspects' arrest.

Six Hundred Years of Bloodshed

Conflicts between the Hutus and Tutsis, the two main ethnic groups in Rwanda, date back about 600 years. The most recent fighting took place in 1994 after the death, in a plane crash, of Habyarimana, the Hutu president. The country erupted in an orgy of violence and murder. A Hutu militia, the *interahamwe*, prepared lists of Tutsis and Hutu moderates to be eliminated, then went from village to village and house to house murdering unsuspecting victims. The mostly-Tutsi Rwandan Patriotic Front invaded Rwanda, and death counts rose even higher. It is estimated that somewhere between 500,000 and 1 million people lost their lives.

Until the 1994 killings, the church in Rwanda was one of the fastest growing in the world. According to the General Conference Archives, in 1993, one in every 27 Rwandans was an Adventist, one of the highest concentrations in the world. If the ratio of those killed (500,000 to 1 million) to the population of the country were the same among the Adventist population, between 20,000 and 40,000 Adventist members were killed. A General Conference World Report says that, of the nearly 300,000 Adventist Rwandans, more than 100,000 fled as refugees and 10,000 more were killed in the crisis.

Sabbath Slaughter in the Mugunaro Church

Many Adventists were murdered in their homes, while others were killed in churches where they fled for safety. One of the worst tragedies occurred in a large Adventist community in Mugunaro, in the region of Kibuye. The Adventist headquarters for the area boasted a large church, a nursing

school, a hospital, and a primary school. It was an "Adventist ghetto," said Elder L. T. Daniel, president of the Africa-Indian Ocean Division, and many people went there for protection. On April 16, 1994, the Mugunaro massacre began when the *interabamwe* and their supporters attacked the thousands seeking refuge in the church and surrounding buildings. A few escaped, but most died in the slaughter.

In *Death, Despair, and Defiance*, African Rights published the testimonies of several survivors of the Kibuye massacre. All name Elsapane Ntakirutimana as responsible for the killing. The information contained in these testimonies varies in detail and seriousness of accusation, and constitutes much of the evidence against Ntakirutimana.

Elia Gashi, a 32-year-old man who lost 40

members of his immediate and extended family during the killings, describes the tragedy:

As soon as we knew that Habyarimana was dead, we had the idea of seeking protection at the church. As there were a number of Seventh-day Adventist pastors living there, we went to the Adventist church on Friday the 8th. Soon after that, the white missionaries left. Three gendarmes came and said they would provide security for us. In the meantime the number of refugees was growing. . . . On Saturday the 16th, the day of the Sabbath, the gendarmes came and said they had a message for us. . . . that the prefet wanted the refugees to leave the church. We hardly had any time to take this message in. Within a few minutes, the same gendarmes returned, accompanied by a lot of *interabamwe* [militia]. Then the killing started. Seth Sebihi, the head of the church, took the women and children inside the church. The men remained outside because we wanted to defend ourselves.

Seventy Times Seven . . .

L. T. Daniel, president of the Africa-Indian Ocean Division, tells the story of a Seventh-day Adventist pastor's wife.

When the crisis began, a Hutu member of one of the Seventh-day Adventist churches in Rwanda killed his pastor and thought he had also killed the pastor's wife. The children ran for their lives. After the killers had left, the couple's 20-year-old son came back to see if the parents were still alive. He found his father dead. His mother also looked dead, but when he came to lift her, he could feel that she was still warm. He immediately called for help and rushed her to the hospital. Suffering from a deep gash in her forehead, for two weeks the pastor's wife remained in a coma. It took her months to fully recover.

Finally able to function, the pastor's wife went to the village market. There, she looked up and

found herself eye-to-eye with the fellow Adventist who thought he had killed her. The man fell down, began rolling on the ground, and went into convulsions. Since it was in the middle of the marketplace, a crowd quickly gathered.

The pastor's wife knew that if she showed the scar on her forehead and accused the man, the crowd would kill him immediately. So, she told everyone, "Please don't touch him; don't touch him. He saw me, and since he thought I was dead [she didn't tell a lie!], he couldn't believe it. He must have gone into some kind of shock."

So the crowd helped the man to his feet, and took him to the woman's house. The man had torn his clothes, rolling around on the ground, and the pastor's wife gave him water to bathe himself. After he bathed, she took the shirt of her 20-year-old son, who had rescued her, and gave it to the man.

She told him, "I know you killed

my husband and you attempted to kill me. God saved me. I will not be the one who will turn you in. I will not be the one who will call people to kill you. I just plead with you to make yourself right with your God. My husband is gone and it is by the special grace of God that I am alive. Now go away. I don't want anyone to hear that my husband's killer is in my house. They will come and kill you, and maybe kill me."

She also told the man, who had stopped going to church, "If I were you, I would make things right with my God. I have forgiven you for killing my husband. You had better go and make things right with your God, and begin going to church again. Where you run to, go to church. Go and fellowship with the brethren."

I have seen this courageous, forgiving woman. The scar is still there. So is her voice, in a Shepherdless singing group. This, too, is Rwanda.

The attacks were coming from all sides since the *interabamwe* were many, having come from a number of communes. A lot of soldiers were there. There was a lot of shooting and a lot of dying.

According to Gashi's account, he and many others rushed to the Adventist hospital. The killers pursued them.

By 11:00 a.m., they invaded the hospital, looting and killing. Around 1:00 p.m. they threw pepper gas into the hospital. Of course those who were still alive sneezed and coughed. This way the killers knew who was still alive and went in and killed them.

The attempt to save the women and children by placing them in the church was equally disastrous, Gashi says.

There were no survivors among the women and children in the church. The man who is responsible for their death is Elsaphane Ntakirutimana, president of the Adventists in the region of Kibuye. He is the one who mobilized the other pastors and the population which was

scared to go to the church. He is also the man who brought the gendarmes. Sebihi wrote to Elsaphane asking for help. In fact, Sebihi wrote three letters, one to the bourgmestre, Charles Sindikubwabo, one to the bourgmestre's father, who was a fellow pastor, and one to the prefet. We heard that Elsaphane refused to take the letter. He came and told us, "You die like men, not like children." He is a pastor. But those are the words he left us with. You can imagine how we felt. The bourgmestre was also physically present at the church on the 16th and had a gun.

Edison Kayihura, 34, a farmer from a district in Ngoma, lost his wife and three children inside the Adventist church. He, too, mentions the letter to Ntakirutimana, begging for protection.

Many people sought protection at the church because the gendarmes told them that they would find protection there. For eight days we had that protection, which encouraged more and more people to come to the church. Then on the 16th, Sabbath day, the protection ended and the killing began. A lot of *interabamwe* from different communes turned up on the 16th. Many of the pastors who had taken refuge at the church wrote to the bourgmestre's father, asking for help. They asked someone to give the letter to another pastor, Elsaphane Ntakirutimana, who was meant to get it to the bourgmestre's father. The pastors wrote the letter when the gendarmes said they could no longer look after our security. They asked for protection or at least further

advice. Elsaphane sent a message back saying that there was nothing he could do to save them. The pastor of the church, Seth Sebihi, took the women and children into the church. He said he did not see what else we could do except to pray and wait for our death.

When the killing started, they killed both in the church and in the hospital. I was in the church. As the killing continued, I fell under dead bodies. I made sure I was ad-

equately covered by dead bodies and soaked with the blood of others. When they thought that everyone was dead, they started the looting. The fact that there are any survivors is due to the fact that a few of us were able to sneak out in the night.

Jerome Bayingana was in his fourth year of secondary school at the time of the crisis. His testimony corroborates the others' eyewitness accounts of the slaughter on the 16th.

We fled to the hospital. There were a lot of us. All the rooms of the hospital were full, as were all the teaching establishments of the hospital. When we got there, there was a doctor called Gerard, a son of a certain Ntakirutimana, the president of the Adventists in Kibuye. This doctor telephoned the prefet of Kibuye to say that a lot of Tutsis had

J. J. Nortey, former president of the Africa-Indian Ocean Division: "There should be a point where we just say what is gone is gone. Let's begin afresh." Echoing his predecessor, L. T. Daniel, the current division president, says, "Our approach is to forget the past and begin afresh."

come the hospital and that this was getting on his nerves. He could not appreciate the reasons why we were there. . . .

The *interahamwe* [the militia] encircled the whole place and started shooting and throwing grenades. That was about 8:00 a.m. The women and girls were inside the church. The men went to confront the attack. We had only stones, spears, and machetes. That day, almost everyone was killed.

Before the genocide, the region of Kibuye had the largest Tutsi population in Rwanda. According to African Rights, within 100 days, a population of more than a quarter million was reduced to fewer than 8,000.

L. T. Daniel, president of the Africa-Indian Ocean Division since the 1995 General Conference Session, was president of the Nigerian Union at the time of the crisis. He says, of testimonies such as the ones published by African Rights, "Some of it is true, some is not."

Heraldo Seidl, head of disaster response for ADRA, agrees. "Nobody tells the truth. People are afraid to. You cannot prove anything in a confused situation like that."

Nevertheless, according to Daniel, Ntakirutimana has been questioned by church authorities regarding the massacre in the village of Mugunaro. Ntakirutimana's defense against accusations, Daniel said, was that the killers told him to leave the area or he would be killed along with the thousands they were planning to murder. So he left.

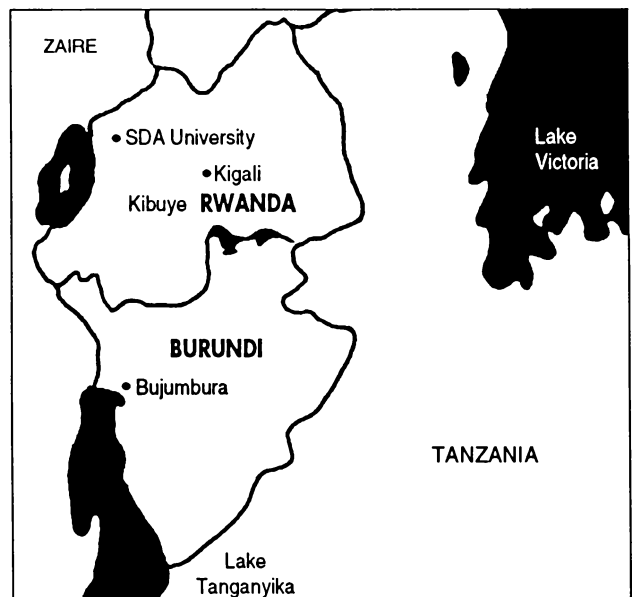
"He Did Not Act Officially . . . There Was No Official Action"

The church has not made an official statement concerning Ntakirutimana. "He did not act officially, if he acted at all," Daniel said. "There was no committee meeting, as we know of, which he called and [which] passed any action. So the church cannot defend him

officially because there was no official action. . . . If he acted at all he acted on his own . . . so the church does not have an official position on him."

Ray Dabrowski, communications director of the General Conference, says, "The Seventh-day Adventist Church condemns atrocity in any form. We are supportive of the initiatives of the Rwandan government and the United Nations to bring to justice those who are responsible for the illegal activities in that country's crisis."

The church where the massacre occurred has now become a sort of museum. Several Adventist young people exhumed four bodies from the mass graves and placed them in coffins in front of the pulpit in the church, "as a reminder that people came to the church for safety, but met death," Daniel says. The young Adventists first proposed that bodies should be placed in glass coffins all around the church. The government supported the plan, but Adventist administrators objected, saying the building was built and consecrated as a church. The Adventist officials were overruled by the government and some members of the congregation. The congregation now worships in a nearby building. The church is a museum, showing, Daniel says, how deep-rooted the hurting is.



According to unconfirmed reports, Gerard Ntakirutimana, the son of Elsaphane Ntakirutimana, accused of participating in the genocide, was said to have found work in an Adventist hospital in Zambia after leaving the Adventist hospital in Mugunaro, where the Sabbath slaughter took place. African Rights has gathered an extensive number of detailed, firsthand testimonies about Gerard Ntakirutimana.³ According to Pastor Daniel, Gerard Ntakirutimana is now in Abidjan, capital of the Ivory Coast and location of the headquarters of the Africa-Indian Ocean Division. Daniel says Gerard Ntakirutimana wants to be absolved. Currently, he is not receiving pay from the Adventist Church.

Animosity “Deeper Than Religion”

Many people want to know how those who profess Christianity, including Adventists, can take part in such atrocities. “There is such deep-rooted animosity; deeper than religion,” Daniel says. J. J. Northey, the division president at the time of the massacre, supports this view. “Until Christianity begins to value itself above tribalism and nationalism, then we have a problem. We are trying to bring people together—Hutu and Tutsi.”

“There were many factions in the church already,” says Bob Prouty, an Adventist who helped start the Adventist University of Central Africa, in Mudende. “There were a lot of bad feelings and problems along regional lines. . . . Corrupt leadership also contributed to the problem. Administratively, the church was very weak. . . . Rwanda was isolated and inward-looking, cut off from the correcting influences of society. The Adventists stuck together for the most part, but the church was not prepared for such a crisis.”

The Adventist Church is one of many church organizations that experienced serious ad-

ministrative problems during the 1994 crisis. Many churches expressed great concern that their members were involved in the killings. “[There is] absolutely no doubt that significant numbers of prominent Christians in parishes were involved. . . . Catholics, Anglicans, and Baptists [were] implicated by omission or commission in militia killings,” says Ian Linden, general secretary of the Catholic Institute for International Relations. As spokesperson for the Catholic Church, Linden assumes some responsibility for dealing with the crisis. “The danger is [in assuming] an apologetic role and, by seeking explanation, inadvertently to excuse.”⁴

The Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, as leader of the World Anglican community, sharply criticizes leaders of the Anglican Church in Rwanda. The church “should have been pointing out some of the atrocities, but by and large its voice was silent.” During a London news conference, following a pastoral visit to Rwanda, Carey said he was appalled no one had been brought to trial, and that “the entire church structure in Rwanda may have to be reorganized.”⁵ He subsequently dealt personally with individual bishops accused of involvement in the violence.

What Is Gone Is Gone— Or Is It?

Northey has a different answer. “There should be a point where we just say what is gone is gone. Let’s begin afresh.”

Echoing his predecessor, Daniel, the current division president, says, “Our approach is to forget the past and begin afresh. It is not easy to preach to the deeply aggrieved people in Rwanda after hearing of such atrocities. But we must forgive those who hurt us. We must forgive anyway.”

Adventists around the world wonder if more should not be done, in terms of public

accountability and intense re-examination of Adventism, to reduce the possibility of Ad-

ventists again engaging in genocide, including the slaughter of other Adventists.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Letter from Rakiya Omaar, of Africa Rights, to Roy Branson, March 1, 1996.

2. See "Rwandan in U.S. Linked to Massacre," *Washington Times* (April 11, 1996).

3. Letter from Omaar, March 1, 1996.

4. "The Churches and Genocide: Lessons From the Rwandan Tragedy," *The Month* 28 (July 1995), pp. 256-263.

5. "Carey Criticizes Rwandan Church Leaders," *Christian Century* 112:602 (June 7-14, 1995).