

INTRODUCTION

On 6 April 1994, the plane carrying the Rwandan President was shot down as it approached Kigali. The slaughter of the Tutsi minority commenced in the days that followed. Simultaneously, leaders of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), an opposition movement organized by Tutsi exiles in Uganda, launched a military offensive in Rwanda and seized power in Kigali in early July.

From April to July 1994, between 500,000 and one million Rwandan Tutsi were systematically exterminated by militiamen under Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR in French) control. The genocide was the outcome of long-standing strategies implemented by politico-military extremists who roused ethnic resentments against the Tutsi minority. The extremists also killed many Rwandan Hutu who opposed the massacres.

Fleeing the advancing RPF, the authors of the genocide compelled hundreds of thousands of Rwandans to accompany them towards Rwanda's borders by threats and the influence of their propaganda. The first wave of Hutu arrived in Tanzania in May. In June, a second wave fled to the 'safe humanitarian zone', created by the French army in southwest Rwanda under Operation Turquoise (23 June – 21 August), and then sought refuge in Zaire. The leaders imposed totalitarian control over the refugee camps and used them as a rear base from which to pursue their plan to return to Rwanda and complete the genocide.

From the moment the RPF took control, Médecins Sans Frontières' teams witnessed abuses and brutalities committed by the administration and armed forces, particularly against displaced populations and the hundreds of thousands of detainees crammed into prisons. Prisoners were dying at an alarming rate while awaiting trials that were endlessly delayed by the paralysis of the judiciary system. The violence increased in the months that followed, and rumours about the brutal behaviour of the new regime were corroborated by reports produced by human rights organisations.

In April 1995, an MSF team witnessed the Rwandan army's deliberate massacre of over 4,000 displaced people in the Kibeho camp in southwest Rwanda. MSF spoke out publicly to denounce the killing and produced a report based on the eyewitness accounts of its volunteers. The report documented

the extent of the massacre, and differed greatly from the dismissive account prepared by an international commission of enquiry into what had occurred.

Médecins Sans Frontières again spoke out publicly in July 1995, to criticise the inhuman conditions in which detainees in Gitarama prison were being held and to call for improvements. This stance was backed by medical data collected by MSF volunteers.

In December 1995 the French section of Médecins Sans Frontières was expelled from Rwanda. The whole MSF movement regarded this move as a settling of scores by the Rwandan Government given that it was volunteers of the French section that had directly witnessed events at Kibeho and had initiated the public denunciations.

Médecins Sans Frontières public pronouncements were the result of choices made after considering several dilemmas:

- Was it acceptable for Médecins Sans Frontières, having denounced the génocidaires' control over the Rwandan refugees in Zaire and Tanzania, to encourage the return of refugees to Rwanda, given the insecurity that potentially awaited them? Did MSF have a responsibility to alert them to what was occurring in Rwanda?
- Could Médecins Sans Frontières – after having issued a call for an international armed intervention to put an end to the genocide – now criticise the regime that had effectively done so, thereby risking accusations of favouring the génocidaires and supporting the revisionists?
- Should Médecins Sans Frontières keep silent in order to continue caring for detainees who might otherwise die in the appalling prison conditions?