

# 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 organised 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.

During the summer of 1994, more than one million Rwandans fled their country, driven out as a result of threats by the former authorities and as a result of fear of civilian massacres related to the RPF's military advance. From 1994 to 1996, militiamen and former soldiers, as well as military and political leaders involved in the genocide and armed acts against Rwanda, blended into the population of the Zairian camps along the Rwandan border. Despite warnings, specifically from humanitarian organisations, no international action was taken to separate the refugees from the criminals.

The situation was complicated by the presence in eastern Congo of significant Rwandan-speaking minorities (Banyarwanda and Banyamulenge), some of whom had lived in North and South Kivu for many years. Confrontations between Hutu and Tutsi worsened among the Rwandan-speaking population, while militias organised by local politicians carried out violent attacks against Rwandan groups that, in turn, organised counter-attacks. In 1993, this violence was responsible for 7,000 - 14,000 deaths. In 1994, attacks resumed against the Tutsi Banyarwanda in Kivu.

At the same time, the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (AFDL), group opposing President Mobutu's regime which included young Banyarwanda, joined forces in eastern Zaire under Laurent-Désiré Kabila. In October 1996, the Rwandan and Burundian armies, as well as the AFDL's united forces, attacked refugee camps in Kivu. Over the course of

several weeks, hundreds of thousands of refugees were targeted in armed attacks. Humanitarian organisations and the press were denied access to them.

MSF called for an international military operation to establish safety zones. Although this operation was envisaged at one point during the crisis, it never occurred.

MSF then released a second public statement, which stated MSF's estimate that more than 10,000 people were likely to die if humanitarian organisations did not gain access to the conflict zones.

Starting on November 15, the RPA authorised the return of the refugees to Rwanda. Between 400,000 and 700,000 went back home. The international press accused humanitarian organisations, including MSF, of having exaggerated the gravity of the situation to enhance their fundraising.

In the months that followed, rebels and the RPA hunted down several hundred thousand additional refugees inside Zaire. During that time, the rebels, Rwandan authorities, and for a certain period the international community, denied that those refugees even existed. During the hunt, the pursuers killed many Rwandan Hutu.

At each phase of the exodus, MSF tried to provide aid to both refugees and local populations caught in the fighting. These teams came face to face with the AFDL's and the Rwandan army's bloody methods, which included using humanitarian organisations as a lure to draw out and then kill the refugees.

Throughout 1997, MSF used press releases and reports that documented accounts and witness statements to publicly condemn the killings and the human rights violations that were known to MSF's field teams:

- On 25 April 1997, the Shabunda report condemned the killings committed by the AFDL and the RPA along the Bukavu-Shabunda corridor and the use of humanitarian organisations as a lure to encourage refugees out of hiding.
- On 19 May 1997, the report, Forced Flight used refugee state-

ments to describe their flight across Zaire and the violence the refugees had to endure.

- In October 1997, a retrospective mortality epidemiological study of a group of refugees that reached Njundu in Congo (Brazzaville) in July confirmed the extent of the killings of refugees during that flight.

On several occasions from April to September 1997, MSF condemned the forced repatriation of Rwandan refugees with medical needs. This group had no guarantees of medical treatment or security when they reached their home communities.

These public statements were sometimes slow in coming and followed internal debates over the key dilemmas that the situation raised:

- Could MSF publicise mere estimates of the conditions of these refugees and their health needs, in light of the fact that we had no access to them? Conversely, given lack of access, should MSF refrain from making predictions? Is it wise for a humanitarian organisation to predict the worst?
- Given that MSF was being used to lure refugees from hiding, should the organisation cease activities in the area or pursue them, condemning manipulation in the hope of preventing massacres – but at the risk of endangering its teams and other operations in the region?
- Should MSF call for the refugees to remain in eastern Zaire, with its deadly dangers, or participate in their forced repatriation to Rwanda, where their security was not guaranteed either?