



RWANDA: Reconciliation still a major challenge



Photo: IRIN
A genocide prisoner faces a Gacaca court in Rwimbogo, 20 km east of Kigali

KIGALI, 14 April 2008 (IRIN) - Brigitte Mukandoli was a schoolgirl when a group of militias manning a roadblock near her village of Bishenyi, close to the Rwandan capital, Kigali, seized her.

She was taken to a nearby village and raped by 10 men. One of the militia leaders asked her to make a choice: become a wife or be killed.

She became a wife. Later, she learnt that her family had all been killed. That was in 1994.

Now 32, Mukandoli is struggling to accept that it is possible to forgive her tormentors.

"There is no reconciliation before pardon," she told IRIN. "If security for genocide survivors can be provided - and it is a big if - then we can hope for possible reconciliation with the killers."

Mukandoli is just one of the thousands of Rwandan women who suffered abuse during the 100 days of genocide when Hutu militias turned their guns and machetes on Tutsis

and moderate Hutus.

Rwandan scholars say more than one million people were killed between April and July 1994. Hundreds of thousands of women and girls suffered various forms of sexual violence.

According to AVEGA-AGAHOZO, an NGO for genocide widows, 80 percent of its 25,000 members suffered sexual abuse during the genocide.

Traditional courts

Rwandan officials, pushing for a long-term solution, initiated traditional "gacaca" courts to try some of those responsible for crimes committed during the genocide, and to decongest the prison system.

"Reconciliatory justice is an important stage in the eradication of the culture of impunity [and] in the process of reconciliation," Domitille Mukantaganzwa, executive secretary of the national authority in charge of gacaca courts, said.

According to the authority, the courts were set up because "classic justice didn't meet expectations" - after five years, only 6,000 out of 12,000 suspects had been tried.

The 12,103 gacaca courts, manned by about 250,000 "judges", elected by the local population, were therefore a strategy to expedite justice.

Mukandoli and other survivors are sceptical, however, arguing that the process does not offer adequate protection. Théodore Simburudali, head of the umbrella organisation for genocide survivors, known by its local name Ibuka, which means "remember" in Kinyarwanda, concurs.

The authorities, he said, were reluctant to arrest and prosecute all those charged with killing genocide survivors. Even those charged are released for flimsy reasons, he added.

"It is unbelievable to talk about reconciliation when the criminals are freed for the simple reason of having repented their crime publicly," he said.

However, Samson Gwakwavu, a 40-year-old perpetrator, who was freed by a gacaca court, insisted that the system offers true reconciliatory justice.

"It was difficult to believe that there could be a presidential pardon for such acts," he said while doing community service for agreeing to testify before a gacaca court.

Mixed views

Some analysts argue that despite the trials, genuine reconciliation has yet to be achieved. According to Anne N Kubai, a Swedish-based researcher, some Rwandans see the gacaca process as "victors' justice", which has not yet addressed the root causes of the conflict.

"As many Rwandans say, forgiving is an effort that one makes in order to make life liveable, especially since victims and the ex-prisoners have to live together as neighbours again," she noted in a May 2007 paper.

"Describing the experiences of living in the same communities, some survivors said that despite having forgiven and reconciled, they found it

hard to look each other in the eye."

This assessment is echoed by Mukandoli: "The existence of survivors is still as a danger to the killers," she told IRIN.

Rwandan authorities, however, argue that the gacaca courts have worked well. According to the national authority in charge of gacaca courts, the process has involved 85 percent of the population, and helped alleviate suspicion.

By December, up to 761,446 people will have been brought before these courts - a much faster way of handling the backlog of cases in a manner that enables people to live again in peace and harmony.

"We believe that punishing perpetrators, honouring victims and rehabilitating survivors are the pillars of post-genocide reconstruction and the basis for preventing new genocide," Kamali Karegesa, Rwanda's envoy to Uganda, noted during the official mourning week that ended on 14 April.

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