

Rwanda genocide survivor testimony: Alphonsine Kabagabo

I felt so guilty for surviving, for so many years. For many years I did not want to talk about it. I lost so many of my extended family - cousins, aunties, uncles, and my best friend.

I came from a family of 14 children, but by the time the genocide started in 1994 only two of us lived in Rwanda with my parents.

My other siblings lived in exile, in Burundi, in Congo, in Belgium and Canada, because of the persecution and discrimination that was going on for many years. I used to be very sad to think that they were not here and ask my dad why he sent them away. But I must say, when the genocide started I thought 'this is good'.

In the early morning of 7 April, when we learnt about the death of the Rwandan President, Juvénal Habyarimana, we knew that it was over for us. We decided to gather in a small house far from the main road thinking maybe the militia wouldn't find us.

But a few hours later, around 8am, some militia and soldiers came to our house. They said, 'we are going to kill you'. My dad gave them a lot of money, the radio, whatever he could find, and so they left.

Two hours later they came back. My dad begged them, 'please don't kill my children!' So he gave them the rest of his money and asked one of them to take us to the church. He could have killed us, but he took us to the church.

When we got there we thought we were safe, but that was not the case. There were so many other people - some who were injured and some who were dying. We spent the first night there and were so scared. We cried and cried.

I was the teacher at the school just next to the church, so I knew the priest very well. Usually I don't like talking about Hutu and Tutsi, but he was a Hutu. I went to him and told him there was another small house where my daughter, my sister and her children were hiding. If we could go there we might find milk for the children. He agreed and we went to hide in this house. There were a few other women there. We had one bottle of milk for 10 children.

An hour after we had left, the militia and soldiers came to kill the people in the church. My mum, my dad, my nephew, my niece, they were all at the church. Someone came running and told us they were killing people, so we thought 'that's it, they are dead.' Later on in the night my dad came to the house. The priest brought him, along with my niece and nephew. We could not believe it!

We hid there for about a week, crying and not having much to eat. But at least we were safe. The priest would say, 'please make sure the children do not cry, because if the militia hear anything they will come this way.'

Another miracle happened on the morning of 13 April. I was called by the priest to come and meet someone. I was so scared because I thought certainly someone wanted to kill me. But I went out of the house and I saw my brother-in-law, who was a Belgian soldier [and member of the UN peacekeeping mission]. You see, one of my sisters who lived abroad had married a soldier. We always tell her 'this is the best thing she ever did in her life!'

So that guy managed to be among the soldiers who came to Rwanda. When I saw him I couldn't believe it. He told me to run back to the house, pick up my baby and call my

sister. I begged him, ‘can we bring everyone?’ but he said, ‘no, I am not allowed’. My heart broke. I wanted to give my baby to my sister and stay with my colleagues, but he pulled me away.

He took us into a big army tank and when I got in my mum was there! We thought she was dead, but when they started killing people in the church, she fell on the floor and bodies fell on top of her. So when the priest and others came to the church afterward they found her among the survivors. How can you explain that? It is a miracle.

We were taken to the airport and spent the night there before we were taken to Nairobi [in Kenya].

I was so upset with the international community. They were there - the peacekeepers - but they were not allowed to rescue Rwandese. How can we be abandoned like animals? You know, even animals are sometimes rescued. That anger, I still have it. I still see it happening in many other countries: in South Sudan and elsewhere.

I was also very upset with my own people. Yes there was so much propaganda, but we were human beings first. What they did was beyond what you can do. One of my cousins was raped by 10 soldiers. My best friend was killed in a way I cannot explain. So I was very upset. Rwanda was a 95% Catholic country and people were very, very committed and used to go to church every Sunday; they killed each other in those same churches.

It took me so long to accept it. But, the priest who saved us, and a few others, were good. I need to accept that not everyone is bad.

Sometimes you try to explain what the reason was for the genocide. Really it was the bad leadership we had. The role of a leader is to unite - to lead. But that was not the case with Rwanda at that time. The ministries and local authorities were the main instigators.

I hope with all my heart that we can all unite. Unite and inspire so our children and grandchildren can live in a better world.