

Rwanda genocide survivor testimony: Eric Eugène Murangwa



The Rwanda genocide claimed around one million lives over 100 days between April and July 1994. Eric Eugène Murangwa, an ethnic Tutsi nicknamed 'Toto', was 19 when tension finally boiled over. He recounts how he survived in large part due to his role as goalkeeper for Rayon Sports, one of the country's biggest football teams.

April 6 was a normal afternoon in Kigali when my team-mates and I went for training at Mumena stadium. It was a day with explosions and grenades and shootings here and there which, in reality, could not be described as 'normal', but had become normal. Despite all that, I didn't have the slightest idea that that day - April 6 [when President Juvénal Habyarimana's plane was shot down] - would become the worst day in Rwandan history and a day that reduced every single Rwandan to tears.

A few weeks before, my team had been playing in CAF - the Confederation of African Football cup - and had eliminated El Hilal [football club] from Sudan, one of Africa's football giants. For about three hours this win was a very significant moment in Rwandan history as Rwandans became united, with scenes of celebrations that brought together Hutu and Tutsi people.

This game became very crucial to what happened to me afterwards.

In the early hours of April 7, I was woken up by the sound of bullets and bomb explosions coming from all corners of Kigali. I still didn't know what was going on until a few hours later when I turned on the radio and heard that President Habyarimana had been killed when his plane had been shot down. My first reaction was total confusion almost impossible to describe.

All people were ordered to stay indoors and my neighbourhood was swamped by soldiers who came looking for weapons hidden in people's houses. About five soldiers broke into

our house. I only escaped death when one of the soldiers spared my life, and that of those I was with, after recognising me as Toto from Rayon Sports when he found a photo album. The El Hilal game was a big factor why this soldier did what he did for me.

But what I didn't know was that this would be the last day I would ever see many of my friends, colleagues and many members of my family, including my youngest brother Irankunda Jean Paul who was just seven-years-old at the time. The same night he had just gone for his Easter School holiday to a distant cousin's house, who worked as a medical nurse at Ndera mental hospital.

Their protection lasted until the UN decided to cancel its peace-making mission in Rwanda. French and Belgian soldiers rescued the European citizens, leaving Rwandan nationals, including my late brother, at the hands of the militia who had already surrounded the hospital. Almost everyone at Ndera hospital was later killed by militias.

As the killings intensified, my teammate Munyurangabo was the man who made sure that I and a number of other people were all looked after by providing some kind of protection and hope. He went out to look for food to feed us all.

He got information that enabled some of us to escape to the safe area of the city. He went the extra mile to negotiate with killers when they wanted to attack us and, in my case, he paid his own money to free me and some of my colleagues from the Interahamwe [militia composed primarily of young people].

More importantly, he helped me to reach the house of my football club's fan who helped me to move from my neighbourhood of Nyamirambo to the International Red Cross HQ and then to Mille Collines Hotel. From Mille Collines Hotel I was evacuated to the RPF [rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front] controlled area where I finally made it to safety.

Out of more than 10 people who were at Munyurangabo's house, only Munyurangabo lost his life during that period. The poor man was not even a Tutsi nor a so-called 'Tutsi sympathiser'. He was just an ordinary man who happened to be an incredible human being with courage and humanity that most people inside and outside Rwanda lacked at a time when people needed it most.

Over the entire 100 days of genocide I lost more than 35 family members - uncles, aunts, cousins, nieces, nephews and one young brother.

For many years afterwards, I kept asking 'why me?' And, recently I came to realise that those who survived had all survived for a purpose, which is to make sure our loved ones weren't lost in vain. The only way we can do that is to make sure that what happened to them, and to us, never happens to our children.