

The commemoration of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwandan schools

Introduction

The genocide against the Tutsi, which took place in Rwanda in 1994, took the lives of more than a million, tore the Rwandan social fabric in pieces, destroyed a large part of the infrastructure and left deep wounds in the hearts of many Rwandans. Following the genocide, the government of Rwanda committed to never allowing such an atrocity to happen again. As a result, Rwanda observes Kwibuka (meaning “remember”), a genocide memorial week during April 7-13th, and a 100-day period of reflection from April 7th to July 7th, symbolizing the length of the genocide, for both Rwanda and the global community to commemorate the sad events of 1994. The National Commission for the Fight against Genocide has also been put in place with a mission “to prevent and fight against genocide, its ideology and overcoming its consequences”¹

During these memorial periods, activities related to genocide commemoration take place across the country and in Rwandan diplomatic missions abroad. These activities have a specific focus on young people, because it is by their hands that Rwanda can propel itself into a space which preserves the memory of generations before and after the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi². Therefore, it is crucial that young people understand why the genocide took place in Rwanda, its consequences and their role in ensuring that it never happens again. It is because of this that the Rwandan primary and secondary school curriculum integrates peace and values education and genocide studies as crosscutting issues across all subjects because,

Rwandan children should know about the genocide perpetrated against the Tutsi alongside the Holocaust and other genocides. They should know what caused the genocide in Rwanda, its planning and execution, how it was stopped and what the consequences have been. Rwandan children should take part in fighting genocide ideology and genocide denial³.

In this context, genocide commemoration activities are also held in schools every year. This article elaborates on the way the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi is commemorated in schools in Rwanda and how children and teenagers are helped to know more about the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, especially because most school students were born after 1994, and ultimately to overcome the legacy of genocide.

1 Retrieved from <https://cnlg.gov.rw/index.php?id=127>, on 17 March 2021.

2 Never Again Rwanda (n.d).

3 Rwanda Education Board (2015, p.5).

Why is it so important for children and young people to commemorate the genocide against the Tutsi?

The purpose of annual commemoration of the genocide against the Tutsi is to awaken greater awareness of Rwandans and the international community about the value of life, and to renew our collective commitment to protect and uphold fundamental human rights to ensure that genocide never happens again anywhere in the world. More specifically, the commemoration is to honor the memory of more than one million Rwandans who died in the hundred days of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. Rwanda is walking the journey of reconciliation and rising from the ashes it had been reduced to, in order to survive, live, and thrive as a nation with *forward* being identified as the only way to go⁴ while ensuring the pledge of ‘never again’ is a true ‘never again’.

During the time of commemoration, there are also different activities and initiatives to support genocide survivors in various ways. The 1994 genocide against the Tutsi is commemorated at the local village, district or national levels, depending on the priority set out by the government each year. During the memorial week, people often come together to listen to talks about the history of Rwanda, to hear testimonies of genocide survivors and speeches from leaders. On April 7th, the President lays a wreath at a memorial site where genocide victims are buried and a procession, called a ‘Walk to Remember’, brings together Rwandans and foreigners residing in Rwanda and ends at a central location where candles are lit as part of a night vigil to honor the genocide victims. The “Walk to Remember” was conceived in 2009 by the members of an organization called Peace and Love Proclaimers (PLP) to empower the youth of Rwanda and around the world to take a stand against genocide. By using the walk as a platform to educate the youth about genocide, PLP uses knowledge and understanding as a means for prevention⁵.

Most of the people who take part in the Walk to Remember are young people. Given that the genocide commemoration week usually happens during school holidays, students make their own choice to attend the Walk to Remember rather than attending as part of an organized school event. However, genocide commemoration activities also continue to happen in schools throughout the 100 days, with each school dedicating one of these days to some sort of commemoration activity.

Rwanda’s national school curriculum states that “Rwandan students will remember the genocide, which is a means to protect the memory of those that were lost”⁶. The necessity for the youth to remember the lives lost in the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi is reflected in President Kagame’s speech on the 26th Commemoration of the genocide against the Tutsi. He said,

We will continue to educate new generations of today and of the future about what happened to our country and what we have learnt from it. The lessons learnt from our history have united us; they teach us the value of good leadership that cares for the well-being of all citizens. We have learnt the importance of working together to build a better future for all Rwandans without discrimination. We put these lessons into practice for the benefit of those who will come after us.

⁴ Retrieved from <http://kwibuka.rw/>, on 11 March 2021.

⁵ Bishumba (2017).

⁶ Rwanda Education Board (2015, p.21)

Ways of commemorating the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in schools

The way in which the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi is commemorated in schools is not very different from the way it is commemorated across the country. Here we've described some of the ways that this happens.

'Walk to remember' and other events

Many schools organize an event called a 'Walk to Remember' as one way of commemorating the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. Students and school staff walk as a group in a quiet procession from the school towards the nearest genocide memorial site where many victims are buried. There they lay a wreath and spend some time in quiet reflection. Such silent and contemplative walks constitute opportunities for the participants to reflect on the genocide and learn lessons from these so as to play an active role in fighting the genocide ideology. One of the co-founders of the 'Walk to Remember' initiative, Marc Gwamaka, said that though the initiative was designed to give meaning to the 'Never Again' pledge, it has over the years played a critical role in making a stand against genocide ideology⁷.

After the walk and laying of a wreath, the students go back to the school, where they might light candles in memory of genocide victims, including staff and students who worked or studied at their school. The light is also a symbol of courage and resilience and, above all, a light to symbolize life. Often, after the walk and lighting of candles, the students and teachers sit together in the grounds of the school to listen to talks from people who are well informed about the history of Rwanda including how the genocide against the Tutsi was planned. Today, most students were born after 1994, which means that they did not witness it themselves. They have just heard about it from different sources, some of which may have distorted this part of Rwandan history. These talks at the school help the students to understand how the genocide against the Tutsi was planned for many years, how it was executed, how it was stopped, and the consequences it has had on the Rwandan society. It also gives students the space to ask questions, to talk about the complexities of Rwanda's history, and to understand what is expected of them to ensure that such atrocities never happen again.

During such events, students are given an opportunity to ask questions about things that are unclear to them to gain a deeper understanding. Some genocide survivors are also invited to give testimonies during these events so that students can also hear real stories about things that are unclear to them or to help them to gain a deeper understanding of what happened. These events are usually quiet and often very heavy and emotional times together, as teachers and survivors remember while young people seek to understand the history of their country and what happened in or around their school and families. Some people, mainly genocide survivors, experience the emotions of trauma as they recall what happened to them, their relatives and/neighbors.

Visits to genocide memorial sites

Visiting genocide memorial sites, which is part of this 'Walk to Remember' or can be taken as a separate activity, is another component of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi commemoration in schools. Genocide memorial sites are found in many locations across the country, where victims have been brought together for burial in a safe place that can be well maintained in peaceful and beautiful surroundings. Visiting these sites helps the students to see with their own eyes the reality of the

⁷ Times Reporter (2015).

genocide and honor the victims of the genocide who are buried there. This helps them to understand their role in building a peaceful society. Through such visits, students extend their understanding of the history of the country and the negative impact of divisionism⁸. Students are reminded that youth are the foundation for the Rwanda of tomorrow and are challenged to fight the genocide ideology and genocide denial⁹, by helping them understand what took place¹⁰.

Supporting genocide survivors

Another way that school students are encouraged to play their role in the building of their nation in the here and now, is to take part in providing practical support to some genocide survivors who have suffered economic hardship as a result. Students use the resources available to them to support genocide survivors by meeting some practical needs. Some schools organize community work where students help to construct or renovate houses for genocide survivors, or provide them with food or other gifts. In addition to helping the students to see the impact which genocide has had on the Rwandan society, playing a role in such activities helps the students become good, compassionate and active citizens who understand that the future of the country is in their hands.

Unity and reconciliation clubs in schools

One other strategy which is used to help students learn about the genocide against the Tutsi and its impact, and understand the importance of uniting and working together as Rwandans, —regardless of their social, economic and ‘so-called’ ethnic backgrounds—is the creation of Unity and Reconciliation Clubs in schools¹¹. We say ‘so-called’ because we are all Rwandans, and labels that once determined who would live or die, no longer apply to Rwandans. Most of these clubs focus on fighting against genocide ideology and promoting unity and reconciliation through debates, dialogues, and peer education as well as opportunities to organize and get involved in outreach activities¹². The discussions in these clubs are focused on techniques to manage and resolve conflicts and tackle divisive discourse¹³. The aim is for these discussions to happen with honesty and mutual respect to build empathy and community. It can be argued that such clubs have played a role in the relatively good status of reconciliation in Rwanda which, according to the Rwanda Reconciliation Barometer (RRB), stood at 94.7% in 2020 up from 82.3% in 2010 and 92.5% in 2015¹⁴, while the number of Rwandans who view themselves through ethnic lines also reduced slightly from 30.5% in 2010, to 27.9% in 2015¹⁵.

Conclusion

As we gather together to remember, we pay tribute to those who lost their lives, and we honor and support the survivors—including the thousands of women who were raped and abused, the children who were deprived of their parents, the parents left childless and many others who suffered. We draw lessons and courage from this tragic history that enables us to move forward.

Young people need this more than anybody else, because they are the key players in building the

8 Mutungirehe (2018).

9 Ndayishimiye (2015).

10 Times reporter (2010).

11 Sentama (2014).

12 Ingabire (2018, p.1).

13 Tobie & Masabo (2012)

14 National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (2021)

15 International Alert (2018)

'Rwanda we want' and allowing progress to continue. As expressed recently in President Kagame's speech on the 27th Commemoration of the genocide against the Tutsi: *'the intangible transformations which have taken place in the hearts and minds of our people are even more important. They allow progress to be sustained from generation to generation.'*¹⁶

Given the key role played by education in equipping new generations for a brighter future, it is important that schools ensure that learners know about and understand the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, and play their part to ensure that genocide never happens again in Rwanda and elsewhere. Combined with the emphasis in the new curriculum on skills such as critical thinking, empathy, personal responsibility and trust, and including studies about Rwanda's history including the genocide against the Tutsi as part of the curriculum itself, involving children and young people in genocide commemoration activities and events in and out of school is critical for progress to be sustained and past atrocities to be 'never again'. As President Kagame said, *'even in the midst of constant pressures and distractions, Rwanda today is unquestionably more united and forward-looking than ever before. And here, I am speaking particularly about the youth, who are the vast majority of our country's people.'*¹⁷

16 Address by President Paul Kagame, Kwibuka 27, Kigali, 7 April 2021

17 Address by President Paul Kagame, Kwibuka 27, Kigali, 7 April 2021

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