

Rwanda factsheet

country profile

Population ¹

8.27 million

Geography

Rwanda is a landlocked country in Central Africa, east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Size

26,338 sq km, slightly smaller than Maryland

Languages

French, English, Kinyarwanda

Religion

Roman Catholic 56.5%, Protestant 26%, Adventist 11.1%, Muslim 4.6%, other 1.8%

Ethnic Groups

Hutu 84%, Tutsi 15%, Twa 1%

Inhabitants of Rwanda speak the same language, have the same culture and for centuries, have intermarried. The three

“ethnic” groups—the Bahutu, the Batutsi and the Batwa—are referred to in the West as Hutus, Tutsis and Twas. Following a genocide in 1994 and decades of ethnic strife that preceded it, Rwanda is in the process of

rebuilding its economic and social infrastructure. At the same time, it is addressing the complex issues of post-genocide justice and reconciliation and the long-term effects of conflict on the population.



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Status of Women

Deeply entrenched socio-cultural barriers continue to prevent meaningful gender equity within Rwandan society. Rwandese women have traditionally performed the majority of the nation's subsistence farming duties and have had little access to the modern business sectors. A number of women, however, run small income-generating projects and medium-sized businesses. While Rwanda's constitution includes provisions to help foster gender equality, Rwandese women still must contend with limited opportunities in education, employment and other areas. The 1992 codification of women's legal status attempted to improve women's rights relating to marriage, divorce and child custody, though it also formally design-

nated men as heads of households.

Other steps have been taken to bring additional rights to Rwandese women. For example, a 1999 law allows women to inherit property from their husbands and fathers and couples to choose the type of property rights they wish to adopt (e.g. joint ownership or community property).² Women have also made significant inroads in increasing their political participation. Following the 2003 elections, Rwanda's parliament is now close to gender parity, with 49 percent female members, overtaking Sweden as the country with the greatest percentage of women legislators.

Today in Rwanda, over a third of all households are headed by women, many of them widows who lost their

husbands in the 1994 genocide. It is estimated that up to 500,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu women and girls were methodically raped, tortured and physically abused during the genocide.³ Rape and torture of women have long been used as weapons in armed conflict, and the Rwandan genocide was no exception. Women and girls were abducted, kept as sex slaves and treated as spoils of war. While some of these women survived, many were eventually murdered.

The impact of these assaults continues to affect the survivors, as many are now facing life without family members and raising children who were born as a result of brutal crimes. Some survivors have also contracted sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS; as of 2001, 264,000 Rwandan children had been orphaned by HIV/AIDS.⁴ An additional 95,000 children were orphaned as a direct result of the conflict. Furthermore, given the precarious political and socio-economic situation in Rwanda and the high number of children orphaned by the genocide, children are also vulnerable to the recruiting efforts of armed groups.⁵

Because of Rwandan women's courage and willingness to speak, for the first time in history rape was



Footnotes

- 1 "Rwanda" CIA World Factbook, <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications>.
- 2 "Rwanda Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2000." US Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/p/io/rls/rm/2004/30864.htm>.
- 3 Jefremovas Villia. Rwanda: Death, Despair, and Defiance. London: Africa Rights. March 2000.
- 4 "At a Glance: Rwanda Statistics." UNICEF. 2003[cited 8 January 2005], <http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/index.html>.
- 5 "Child Soldier Use 2003." Human Rights Watch. January 2003, http://hrw.org/reports/2004/childsoldiers0104/14.htm#_ednref225.
- 6 "A Profile of Poverty in Rwanda." Rwandan Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning. February 2002, http://www.minecofin.gov.rw/poverty_reduction/index.htm.

prosecuted as a war crime and as a genocidal act in the International Criminal Tribunal that was set up following the genocide. Furthermore, although rape was previously considered a third-degree crime in local Rwandese courts, it is now treated as a first-degree crime. This is an historic legal victory for both Rwandese women and women throughout the world.

Brief History

Rwanda came under the colonial control of Germany in 1899. After World War I, Belgium administered colonial Rwanda through a system of indirect rule from 1919 to 1935.

Belgian colonial administrators allied with the Parmehutu political party, which was founded on partisan ethnic beliefs. With the knowledge of the Belgian government, the Parmehutu began a campaign of massacres in 1959 that eventually led to the unseating of the Tutsi elite. On July 1, 1962, Rwanda formally gained independence from Belgium.

Under the rule of the First Republic of the Parmehutu and President Gregoire Kayibanda, the Tutsis were constant targets of systemic violence and discrimination at the hands of the government and Hutu groups. During the early 1960s and in subsequent years, the government's ideology of "ethnic cleansing" caused over 150,000 Tutsis to seek exile in the neighboring nations of Burundi, Uganda, Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

On October 1, 1990, the Rwandan Patriotic Front, comprised of exiled Tutsis and supported by the Ugandan government, invaded Rwanda, sparking a civil war based on ethnic divisions. Between April and July 1994, approximately 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were systematically killed and up to 500,000 women were raped. During these terrifying months, every level of Rwandan society—top government officials, the Presidential Guard, the National

Gendarmerie, the Rwanda Government Forces, the MRND-CDR militia (*Interahamwe*), local officials and many Hutus in the general population—participated in an attempted annihilation of the country's Tutsi and moderate Hutu populations.

In July 1994, the regime collapsed. Rwanda's infrastructure was devastated by the genocide, and the new government began a process of rebuilding the nation and unifying the Rwandese people.

In the aftermath of the genocide, millions of Rwandese fled to neighboring countries to escape prosecution for their part in the genocide. In 1996, the Rwandan government passed a law that called for the prosecution and punishment of those responsible for the genocide. The United Nations established the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda to prosecute persons responsible for genocide and other serious violations of international humanitarian law committed in Rwanda during 1994. With over 130,000 persons being held under accusation of complicity in the genocide, the government of Rwanda is facing a penal and judicial crisis.

The Economy

The 1994 genocide had a devastating impact on the country's already weak economy. The vast majority of the population was left struggling for even the most basic necessities. Today, nearly 90 percent of the population works in the primarily subsistence agricultural economy. Women are paying a particularly high price since many of their male relatives were killed in the genocide, leaving the women to care for their families alone. In fact, widows head approximately 80 percent of female-headed households.⁶

In an attempt to evaluate and improve Rwanda's weak economy, the government undertook a National Poverty Assessment at the local

level. This process sought to produce poverty profiles for each community, rank community problems, evaluate institutions and services and assess how gender roles and land issues are impacted by the current poverty crisis. The National Poverty Assessment is part of a larger initiative geared to directly involve the people of Rwanda in the process of defining the causes of poverty and pinpointing viable solutions.

Human Rights

The Rwandan government is currently in the process of revising its judicial system by opening a nationwide system of local courts—known as *gacaca*, a traditional form of village-based justice—to prosecute the tens of thousands of perpetrators of genocide offenses. Its aim is to clear the backlog of cases in the conventional judicial system, not to address the continual limits to the persecution of perpetrators of sexual violence and other crimes in the 1994 genocide.

Thousands of Rwandan women were raped during the genocide and in the decade following, but only a few perpetrators of sexual violence have been prosecuted. Weaknesses in the legal system include insufficient protection for victims and witnesses, lack of training for authorities on sexual violence crimes and poor representation of women among police and judicial authorities. Genocide survivors, including women and girls who were raped in 1994, have not been able to obtain reparations such as monetary compensation or other assistance for the human rights abuses they suffered.

Furthermore, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda has failed to charge Tutsis suspected of killing Hutus in the 1994 genocide. Prosecution has focused on Hutu crimes, ignoring the fact that Tutsi forces that ended the genocide by overthrowing the extremist Hutu regime also committed atrocities. The courts have alienated many ordinary Hutus through this approach.

