

January 16, 2009
Report 122

The Worst and Best of Human Nature

When politically induced ethnic violence breaks out the media reports the atrocities--the worst aspect of human nature--, but rarely reports attempts by people to save others from the opposite side--the best of human nature. This is a report on the best side of human nature. In some cases the rescuers were able to save the intended victim, in others they failed, in another example the rescuer was killed for his attempt, and another the successful rescuer was saved by those he rescued. These incidences all occurred in a span of a few days in two communities in Burundi where AGLI and the HROC program are active.

On October 21, 1993, President Ndadaye, the Hutu democratically elected president of Burundi, was assassinated by the Tutsi military. This led to countrywide chaos as Hutu attacked Tutsi in their communities and then the Tutsi military retaliated by killing Hutu. One of the worse massacres occurred at the gas station on the road below Kibimba, the first and largest Quaker mission station in Burundi. A hundred Tutsi students from Kibimba Secondary School and other Tutsi were herded into the gas station office which was then set on fire. Sixty people died and forty escaped. The next day the Tutsi military arrived and killed Hutu at the gas station and looted the small community. I read about this massacre in the media!

Three weeks later, my great friend, Alison Des Forges, who died in the airline crash in Buffalo last February, was at the site of the massacre doing an investigation for a consortium of American and European human rights groups including Human Rights Watch. She later returned in January to continue the investigation. Her report was published in French, but because of the Rwandan genocide in April, she never got time to translate it into English.

I always wondered what was in her report. I asked Sarah Jackson who had worked for Human Rights Watch in Rwanda (and later with Quaker Peace and Social Witness (British) with the American Friends Service Committee in Burundi) and is now in Uganda and helping AGLI with the training for our latest project to use cell phones for grassroot reporting on the upcoming Burundi elections, if she could send me a copy of that part of the report. She sent it to me along with the next section which included Mutaho where AGLI and HROC is doing a lot of work. I then sent the French version to Sheila Havard (Canada) to make a rough translation. This she did. In her email she wrote, "There are a lot of references to people saving or trying to save others."

True. In only 8 pages of the report there are 14 incidents of people trying to save others. I quote them all here:

1. *"There was even a Hutu teacher who tried to save some of the Tutsi, and he was killed. He was a biology teacher. His nickname was Kavyimabuhiye."* Testimony by

Magnifique Bizimana, a 21 Tutsi student.

2. "According to other testimony, the principal [of Kibimba Secondary School] did all he could to save the hostages."

3. Mutoya Parish: " A lot of Hutu families hid and kept neighbouring Tutsi families in their homes."

4. Mutaho Commune: "A Hutu [priest/church staff member] from the parish said that some parish workers had come to get him to save a Tutsi on Thursday 21st at 9 p.m.. He said: *'We went to tell the people who were all worked up not to shed any blood.'*"

5. "A Hutu [nun/church staff member] recounted that she had hidden an UPRONA [member/supporter] and his family on Friday morning. He already had a head wound. In the afternoon a gang armed with lances came to get him but the [nun/church staff member] managed to thwart them." UPRONA was the Tutsi party at that time.

6. The same nun said, " *Then an old woman came to seek refuge. Her husband and son had been captured. She only had a blanket left.*"

7. She continues, " *Then, with the priest, we rescued a young man who was being [arrested/stopped] on the road. There was a crowd on the road going to Mutaho, shouting: 'We've been told that people are dying on the road.'*"

8. "In the Mutaho trading centre, on Friday morning, a group of Hutu armed with pangas and clubs went round the houses inviting everyone to come and demonstrate against the assassination of President Ndadaye. Those who refused were threatened with death. So an UPRONA [member/supporter] had to seek refuge in the house of a neighbour who was a Hutu shopkeeper, a [member/supporter] of FRODEBU and of the Muslim faith." FRODEBU was the Hutu party of President Ndadaye. Please note that contrary to the depiction of Muslims in the US media, in both Rwanda and Burundi, Muslims were frequently noted from not participating in the killings and helping to save people.

9. "Somewhat later, this same shopkeeper intervened to prevent a rich Tutsi shopkeeper from being killed. He was hit with a stick and had to flee without being able to save the Tutsi."

10. The same Muslim shopkeeper, "Later on he hid the principal of the commune college and an English teacher in his home, both Tutsi, as well as a Hutu [member/supporter] of UPRONA and the wife of the rich shopkeeper who had just been killed. He hid them for two days until the military came on Monday morning and took them to an IDP camp."

11. Again the same shopkeeper, "The Hutu Muslim shopkeeper risked being killed at this time but the people he had saved pleaded for him and saved him in turn."

12. "A 53-year-old Tutsi, a [member/supporter] of UPRONA living on Nyakero Hill

explained how he had fled from the killers: *'They wanted to exterminate only the [ethnic group of UPRONA Tutsi]. We fled into the bush. When the soldiers arrived, most were dead. [sic] Three of us escaped out of a group of eighteen. I fled when I saw that my brothers and neighbours were being killed. I was saved by a Hutu from my hill, who hid me. Then I went to my Muslim boss, who hid me in his ceiling until the military arrived.'*"

13. "On Wednesday, after the 7 a.m. mass, the parishioners again went to clear the road near Mubarazi River. After the road had been cleared, the soldiers fired on the people who had helped them, killing about fifteen or twenty of them. A student was able to escape, as was a young teacher from Muyange, called Félix, who had a bayonet wound. We thought he was going to die. But the Tutsi nurses who had been hidden in the parish cared for this young Hutu. The priest recommended that they not say anything to the soldiers. Félix was transported to the Kibuye Hospital by the Red Cross."

14. ∇[Church staff] from the parish stated that they were aware of numerous cases of solidarity where Hutu had risked their lives to save, hide and feed neighbours."

I, like so many others, miss Alison Des Forges. She had to go to Burundi to get these testimonies. Let this be a living tribute to her work.

Peace,
Dave

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New webpage: www.aglifpt.org

New email: dave@aglifpt.org