

The Great Lakes Region - Rwandan Dialogue

Reportage



Marie Lyse (left) and Rachel smile and hold hands on occasion of the Rwandan dialogue held in El Masnou (Maresme) ■ CRISTINA FORÉS

“We have cried together”

EMPATHY • Two Hutu and Tutsi women share their pain in Catalonia 14 years after the Rwandan genocide **LONGING** • Leaving behind the ill feelings that sunk their country into war, they dream of peace and reconciliation **DENUNCIATION** • They believe the current regime persecutes the intellectual class

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Evidencing their spirit of self-improvement, Rwandan women have set a landmark in the struggle for peace and reconciliation between Hutu and Tutsi, the neighboring ethnic groups torn apart by a conflict that still endures. Standing as a symbol for this vision and for the initiatives taken by a government that has not

forgotten the genocide which cut a trail of blood through the country’s recent history, the Kigali Parliament now ranks worldwide— after the recent legislative elections, the second held since the 1994 genocide – as the parliament where women members most outnumber their male counterparts, at a greater number than in the exemplary Scandinavian countries.

The involuntary exile millions of Rwandans found

themselves forced into has not dampened the desire for peace to be reestablished. A clear example of this is given by the 26 Rwandan women leaders who have participated in the DIR 2008 Intra-Rwandan Dialogue, an initiative started in Catalonia which aims at providing feasible solutions to the conflict. These women, both Hutu and Tutsi, who come from up to eight European countries, are struggling to leave behind the bitter past

which forced them to flee their homes.

They are women like Marie Lyse, Hutu refugee who leads projects for the youth, and Rachel, Tutsi activist operating at the heart of civil society. Today, they live their lives in countries like the United Kingdom or Belgium; in their minds, however, are anchored memories of villages like Nyamata where a humble monument alone commemorates the victims of an insanity played to the hilt. On occasion of DIR, Marie Lyse and Rachel hold hands for the AVUI daily, glancing at each other knowingly and sharing, full of compassion, the dream of a united Rwanda.

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Exile separated their paths, but, regardless of the ethnic labels which brought about the death of their relatives, having experienced the same pain has brought them together. Their experience is summed up in one single feeling “For the first time ever, we Hutu and Tutsi have mourned our victims together. For the first time ever we have been able to share our pain,” Rachel admits.

Contrary to former editions of the Dialogue, this year the DIR has sought the female perspective. Common values held by women have in this manner prevailed over the differences. “We women stand as a column of peace. We would like to impart this value to our children, a legacy which is very different to the one we received from our parents,” states Marie Lyse a woman who has contributed to the DIR the perspective of those who, like her, had to flee their country when they were still young. “Our pain is different to our parents’, but we also need to share this pain since our plight tore us away from our mothers’ sides”.

800.000 moderate Tutsi and Hutu died in 1994 in a genocide prompted by the State and carried out in a period of 100 days.

Irma Rognoni, lawyer, mediator and together with, Jordi Palou, person in charge of the DIR, explains that “given their culture, community life and the pivotal role they hold in their society, women from Rwanda are a centerpiece of peace.” Rognoni furthermore reminds us that despite having suffered deeply, women took it upon themselves to look ahead and shape the identity of new generations, sowing non-violence, interethnic participation and the transmission of values.

Current president Paul Kagame took power in 2000 when he was elected by Parliament. He was reelected three years later in the first democratic elections held since 1994.

A long path teeming with wounds

2000 marked the year of the election of Paul Kagame, leader of the Patriotic Front, government body and former rebel Tutsi force which had invaded Rwanda from the Ugandan border in 1990. The latter was one of the factors which brought on the genocide later: the death of 800,000 Tutsi by Hutu perpetrators. Today most of the population mistrusts a government accused of having resorted to power to settle the accounts.

“All those who held important positions during the former regime are subject to persecution,” Rachel explains. “The fact that the current Tutsi regime caused the death of Tutsi people, is less known,” Marie Lyse adds, denouncing the current witch-hunt against the intellectual class now held by the Kagame government. Distance allows them a prudent and somewhat optimistic look at the future, yet at the same time they realize that the path ahead is long and one that first requires healing wounds.