

Restoring human dignity and reconciling the people of Rwanda

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Rwanda has over the years experienced bad governance based on discrimination and division of its people. As a result, a prolonged period of corrupt and repressive regimes saw the entrenchment of 'divide and rule' as a principal of governing. Inevitably this repressive culture led to massive human rights violations which culminated in the 1994 genocide that saw up to one million Rwandans perish.

The Government of National Unity considers unity and reconciliation of Rwandan people as the basis for defeating social, economic and political underdevelopment. Hence the setting up of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (URC) by Parliamentary law N°03/99 of 12 March 1999. The establishment of URC, therefore, marked a major milestone in changing, fundamentally, effects of bad governance based on discrimination and sectarianism.

The journey towards reconciliation

The journey towards unity and reconciliation in Rwanda has already begun. It is a journey that is led by Rwandans themselves in a participatory way that will permit Rwandans from all walks of life to shape and influence the ways and means of how Unity and Reconciliation will be achieved. In this sense, the role of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (URC) is essentially that of providing a platform on which Rwandans can air their views about what has divided them in the past and how they can build a united and reconciled Rwanda.

This is an immense task considering the magnitude of the genocide Rwanda experienced, and the hate, wounds and trauma resulting from it.

In order to bring the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission to the people of Rwanda and indeed to permit them to own it, URC decided to undertake varying national exercises of consulting Rwandans on their Unity and Reconciliation, by engaging them in grassroots participatory discussions. The URC also organised a National Summit on Unity and Reconciliation in October 2000, which involved Rwandans of all levels, those living in the diaspora and international friends of Rwanda.

The principal objectives of all these consultations is to persuade the people of Rwanda to give their views on how to steer themselves on a more productive path to reconciliation, by defining what broke their relationship, who did it and how that relationship can be restored.

Rwandans are now discovering, to their surprise, that the ethnic differences which have been so much magnified in the past are not the real differences affecting them. The issue in Rwanda was bad governance, the culture of impunity and social injustices by successive ruling cliques. These have affected almost every Rwandan in one way or another. Reversing these aspects requires a change of attitude that cannot be achieved over night. Every Rwandan has to confront himself/herself and effect reconciliation with the self, his/her God and with their neighbours. We have opted for a strategic approach that aims at re-creating confidence in the community. It is when confidence is restored that mutual respect, coexistence and lasting reconciliation can be attained.

Challenges and legacy of Rwanda's genocide

The effects of Rwanda's Genocide were devastating and immense to the extent that they will continue to be Rwanda's major challenges now and in the future.

∑ 1 Million innocent people killed.

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∑ 3 Million people coerced into exile and held hostages.

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∑ Over 300 000 unaccompanied and orphaned children.

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∑ Over 200 000 widows and widowers.

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∑ 130 000 people suspected of genocide and related crimes held in prisons.

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∑ No government in place.

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∑ No civil service.

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∑ No Police to keep law and order.

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∑ No judicial system in place.

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∑ The whole infrastructure destroyed.

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∑ The country's economy ruined.

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∑ Suspicious and traumatised community.

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The image I have created above shows that a number of things had to be done before any one could think of or talk about reconciliation.

First, there was no government in place and the countryside was littered with unburied dead bodies. Half of the country's population were being held hostage in neighbouring countries and another half who remained in the country needed reassurance that they were safe and secure.

The first step on the journey to reconciliation, therefore, was to establish an inclusive and broad-based Government of national unity in July 1994. The government then embarked on seeking ways and means of securing the release and safe repatriation of those Rwandans.

The security of people and their property has been restored to all parts of the country and a National Police Force has been established to keep law and order and Rwanda is becoming peaceful.

Due to the intensive tracing and reunification that has been going on for the last six years, of the 300,000 unaccompanied children and orphans mentioned above, only about 15,000 are still in the centres. The rest have been reunited either with their own families or placed in foster families. The enthusiasm with which Rwandan families of different socio-economic backgrounds received these children without any discrimination whatsoever, is clear testimony that reconciliation in Rwanda is not a mere illusion.

We have worked together with relevant government ministries to bury the dead. A complete week in April of each year is set apart for this purpose. This does not mean that no burials are done any other time, but this is a week consecrated for lamenting those innocent people who died during genocide.

When refugees were repatriated, they were helped to return to normal life and a deliberate effort was made to reintegrate all those deserving individuals in the civil service and in the army. Soldiers who a few years back fought one another as enemies are now fighting side by side in defence of their motherland. This is another indication that given the right leadership, the people of Rwanda can once again live together in harmony. We have integrated well over 10,000 former Rwandan soldiers into the present National Army and demobilised almost the same number of Rwanda Patriotic Army men and officers.

Democracy and justice

A national electoral commission was also instituted to plan and oversee national elections. This was done to ensure that good governance and democracy are restored in the country. We have

so far had two different levels of elections and the URC was involved in a monitoring capacity. The report received indicates that they went well so far.

As I mentioned earlier, justice has been and still is a very crucial issue in my country. Right now we have more than 110,000 people still in prison, suspected of having committed genocide or other related crimes. We realised that if these people have to be tried in conventional courts, the cases would take centuries. We are now opting for a kind of popular participatory system of justice, locally known as Gacaca. Its major features and contributions will be:

• Those suspected of having committed the crimes will be taken to their villages and will be accused, tried and defended by the people who witnessed what actually took place.

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• The number of Gacaca courts will be far more than the existing 12 Provincial courts. This will help speed up trials. The truth will also be revealed since the people who witnessed the crimes being committed will give evidence.

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• The community will be involved in the resolution of their conflicts, hence eradicating a culture of impunity. The participation of the community will also foster a spirit of truth, reconciliation and unity.

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In order to ensure accountability, social justice and fair distribution of national resources, the government put in place, the following accounting institutions: The office of the Inspector General of Government (IGG), The National Tender Board, Human Rights Commission, the National Examination Board, the Scholarship Board, Poverty Reduction Commission, Rwanda Revenue Authority etc.

The URC, therefore, co-ordinates with these institutions in its responsibility of monitoring any activity that would cause conflict in society. Once a conflict is detected, the URC reports it to the relevant authority as an early warning (if it hasn't manifested itself yet) or advocates for mediation where it has already appeared.

Recently, the commission proposed a law that will punish all kinds of discrimination. The proposed law aims at applying, in a specific law, the equality and non discriminatory principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, those in other international conventions, pacts and treaties ratified by Rwanda as well as those found in Rwanda's basic law.

We found that condemning discrimination without a law that punishes it wasn't enough. The proposed law, therefore, intends to punish any individual, association and political party tried and found guilty of acts of exclusion and discrimination based on ethnicity, region, sex or religion.

Through its programmes, its newsletter, through both private and public media, the Unity and Reconciliation Commission is sensitising and will continue to sensitise the Rwandan Community to their rights and encourage them to give their views and ideas about what should be done in order for them to be reconciled and to restore unity. Memories are still fresh. They are not good memories, but we are trying to tell our people that despite all that happened, life must continue.

Former Minister of Gender and Social Affairs, Aloisea Inyumba is now Executive Secretary of the National Commission for the Unity and Reconciliation in Rwanda (NURC). NURC organises and oversees national public debates aimed at promoting unity and reconciliation of the Rwandan people. It educates Rwandans on their rights and assists them in building a culture of tolerance and respect for others. NURC also monitors other institutions to ascertain whether they respect and observe policies and practices that promote reconciliation and tolerance.