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Gatumba Massacre, Background Essay

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On August 13th 2004, 166 people were killed and 106 were wounded at the UN's Gatumba refugee camp in Burundi. Nearly all the victims were members of the Banyamulenge community, a Congolese Tutsi ethnic group who were deliberately targeted in the attack. The massacre was carried out by the Forces Nationales pour la Liberation (FNL), a Hutu supremacist rebel group fighting in Burundi's civil war. Understanding the Gatumba Massacre requires understanding what forced those Banyamulenge refugees to flee their homes in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and why the FNL targeted them.

The majority of Banyamulenge live in the province of South Kivu on the DRC's eastern border with Burundi and Rwanda. As Congolese Tutsi, the Banyamulenge have lived in the South Kivu highlands for centuries, beginning when their ancestors first migrated from Rwanda. During the 1980s and 1990s, political opponents of the Banyamulenge used their ancestors' Rwandan origin to argue that the Banyamulenge were foreigners with no right to citizenship. The Banyamulenge's increasing marginalization was one of the many ethnic, national, and international tensions destabilizing South Kivu province. These tensions would explode into a cross-continental war as a result of the Rwandan genocide.

The 1994 Rwandan genocide was fueled by ethnic conflict between Rwanda's Hutu majority and the Tutsi minority, two pre-colonial social classes that hardened into ethnicities as a result of Belgian colonization. Prior to independence in 1962, Rwanda had been ruled by a Tutsi aristocracy, but the Hutu majority seized power through a wave of ethnic violence that displaced hundreds of thousands of mostly Tutsi refugees into neighboring countries. 28 years later in 1990, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) - a rebel army composed of Tutsi refugees and backed by Uganda - invaded northern Rwanda. By 1993 the RPF had advanced to just outside the capital and forced the Hutu government to sit for peace talks.

These negotiations ended on April 6th 1994, when Rwanda's Hutu President Habyarimana's plane was shot down by an unknown group. It's possible that Habyarimana was killed by Hutu supremacists who opposed a peace deal with the predominantly Tutsi RPF, or by the RPF itself. Either way, the Rwandan genocide began the next day. Between 500,000 and one million Tutsi and politically moderate Hutus were killed between April 6th and late July, when the RPF took control of the country and put an end to the genocide.

As the RPF advanced, hundreds of thousands of mostly Hutu refugees - perpetrators of the genocide among them - fled into camps in neighboring countries. Many settled in South Kivu, the eastern region of the DRC (formerly Zaire) where the majority of the Banyamulenge live. The exiled Hutu government used these camps as

bases to launch cross-border attacks back into Rwanda. These forces were supported by Zaire's President Mobutu. The Rwandan Hutu supremacists in these camps incited violence against the Banyamulenge by tapping into the longstanding narrative that the group - whose Tutsi ancestors migrated from Rwanda centuries ago - were really foreigners, aligned with the Rwandan government against Zaire. The violence drove many Banyamulenge to join militias trained and supported by the RPF. Ethnic clashes between Hutu supremacists and these militias culminated in the 1996 RPF-led rebellion against President Mobutu's government.

With support from Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi, many Banyamulenge and other Congolese rebels formed the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (AFDL), and attacked both refugee camps and Mobutu's government. This conflict became known as the First Congo War. Rwanda and Uganda supported the Banyamulenge in part because they had an interest in smashing the refugee camps to stop the cross-border attacks on Rwanda. They also wanted to replace Mobutu with a compliant leader. By 1997, these aims were achieved. The camps were cleared, and possibly up to 200,000 Hutus were systematically slaughtered by the RPF and AFDL. The violence scattered Hutu perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide throughout the DRC and surrounding countries, where some would join groups like the FNL in Burundi. President Mobutu fled the country, and the AFDL elevated Laurent-Désiré Kabila to the presidency. Kabila rechristened Zaire the "Democratic Republic of the Congo."

The Banyamulenge benefitted in the short-term from their involvement in the AFDL as community members rose to influential positions in the military as well as local and national administration. But the increase in political power as a result of aligning with Rwanda alienated them from other ethnic groups, some of whom felt that the Banyamulenge's success confirmed the narrative that they were Rwandan foreigners. This narrative became more potent as the RPF continued to occupy the eastern part of DRC and funneled profits from lucrative Congolese mines back to Rwanda.

President Kabila tried to use this local conflict to strengthen his position and secure independence from Rwanda and Uganda. He consolidated power by engaging in anti-Tutsi rhetoric and diluting the Banyamulenge's influence in the national army. In 1998, the puppet cut his strings and declared that all foreign armies - including the ones which had set him in the seat of power - were to leave the country. Rwanda and Uganda were unwilling to give up their power in the DRC, and initiated the Second Congo War. During the war the predominantly Congolese Tutsi militia the Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD) joined with Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi in attacking Kabila's government.

Over the next four years, different political objectives pulled the anti-Kabila coalition apart. Rwandan forces clashed with the Ugandan army across Congo. Political infighting within RCD split the organization into different factions. The RPF attempted to resettle Banyamulenge within Rwanda, and when some community leaders refused, there were suspicious disappearances and deaths among anti-RPF Banyamulenge. This authoritarian treatment of political dissidents created a narrative among many Banyamulenge that the RPF only used them as a tool to wage war and protect their exploitation of Congolese wealth.

There was a temporary reduction of violence when some of the warring parties signed the 2002 Sun City Accords, a flawed agreement which laid out a plan for a transitional government and integration of armed groups - including the RCD - into a national Congolese army - known by its acronym FARDC. Many problems remained. Even soldiers officially integrated into the FARDC retained ulterior ethnic and political allegiances, and Rwanda maintained control over eastern sections of the DRC through proxy forces. Additionally, Hutu perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide seeped into armed groups in and out of the DRC, with some supporting or directly joining the FNL. As a result, ethnic violence involving the Banyamulenge continued to inflame South Kivu province.

This violence was what drove Banyamulenge refugees out of the DRC and into Gatumba. In May of 2004, two Tutsi officers in the Congolese army with ties to a Rwandan-aligned faction of the RCD mutinied against their superiors and seized Bukavu, the provincial capital of South Kivu, under the pretense of preventing a genocide of the Banyamulenge. Eventually the RCD-aligned officers negotiated their withdrawal from Bukavu and allowed the FARDC to retake the area. Tens of thousands of Banyamulenge fled South Kivu due to legitimate fears that FARDC would inflict reprisals against civilians. 1,767 refugees ended up just across the border at the UN camp in Burundi, where they would be targeted by the FNL.

The FNL were a product of Burundi's civil war. Like pre-independence Rwanda, Burundi's Hutu majority had been ruled by an elite Tutsi minority until 1993, when Melchoir Ndadaye became the country's first democratically elected Hutu President. Ndadaye was almost immediately assassinated by members of the Tutsi military establishment. Some in the Tutsi elite felt that a Hutu president threatened their short term economic interests and the long term political position of Burundi's Tutsi minority. His assassination ignited a brutal civil war which saw the formation of several Hutu supremacist rebel groups - including the FNL.

But by 2004 the FNL were the only major rebel group still fighting. All the other forces had signed a peace accord which transformed them into legal political parties

and laid out a transition plan for incorporating rebels into the national army. The FNL's decision to keep fighting cost them dearly. By the time the Banyamulenge refugees arrived in Gatumba, the FNL were too weak to fight open battles against the military, and they had lost much of their public support to the Forces for the Defense of Democracy (FDD), a former Hutu rebel group that had transitioned into parliamentary politics with great success. The FNL was reduced to using terror attacks in an attempt to improve their negotiating position with the government and upset the peace agreement that had elevated the rival FDD. When the Banyamulenge refugees arrived at Gatumba, they became targets of this strategy.

On August 13th, 2004, hundreds of FNL soldiers and their families (and possibly other groups) attacked the Gatumba camp. They beat drums and sang hymns as they shot, burned, and stabbed unarmed civilians. The next day the FNL's spokesman Pasteur Habimana claimed responsibility for the attack, alleging without evidence that the refugees were being recruited for an invasion of Burundi. 166 people - nearly all Banyamulenge - were killed, and 106 were physically wounded.

No perpetrator has ever gone to trial over the attack. In the eighteen years since the Gatumba Massacre, the FNL has signed on to a peace accord and transitioned into parliamentary politics. It was argued that rebels from the group attacking South Kivu cities of Bukavu and Uvira had fled into this camp. Agathon Rwasa, the FNL's leader during the attack, has never been arrested for his role in the massacre. The Burundian government opened a criminal case against Rwasa in 2013, but indefinitely suspended it a year later. Rwasa is now the leader of the main opposition party in Burundi's parliament and was nominated as a presidential candidate in 2020.

Meanwhile, with the support of NGOs, like Refuge Point and the UN, many Banyamulenge survivors have since resettled in the US, UK, and other countries. In 2007 survivors formed the Gatumba Refugees Survivors Foundation, a community organization which, among other tasks, lobbies governments and international organizations to bring perpetrators of crimes like the Gatumba Massacre to justice. We worked with the GRSF to conduct dozens of interviews with survivors of the Gatumba Massacre. Bringing survivors' stories to public attention is a pillar of genocide prevention, and contributes to the effort to deliver justice while sustaining and honoring the memory of those who were lost. These interviews cover the lives of survivors before, during, and after the massacre, and are presented here in this digital archive.

This essay is co-authored by Christopher P. Davey, Jean Paul Iranzi, Ezra Schrader, and Fidele Sebahizi.

