

tu-led government officials, killing squads of local militias went from house to house murdering anybody with a Tutsi identity card along with moderate Hutus affiliated with the Tutsis.

Armed with machetes, spears and knives, these killing squads known as interahamwe left paths of destruction throughout the country, massacring Tutsi children in their schools and ambushing entire communities seeking refuge in Catholic churches. The elderly were killed in hospitals and mothers were raped in front of their children. The interahamwe showed no mercy.

These horrific events are difficult to wrap one's minds around, especially while conceptualizing the number of people who died in such a short time frame. At the peak of the Rwandan genocide, nearly 8,000 people were killed every day.

The death toll was equivalent to nearly one and a half times Elon's student body dying every day for 100 straight days. For a better visualization, Rhodes Stadium held 9,256 people on Homecoming last November. It would take more than 86 Rhodes Stadiums filled to capacity to approach the death toll of 800,000 people.

Bystanders of genocide

Beyond all the deaths, hundreds of thousands of survivors continue to carry traumatic images of streets lined with corpses, women being raped, pickup trucks filled with missing limbs, and other memories of horrific forms of violence. While Rwandans were experiencing a living nightmare, the international community merely watched. The United Nations deployed a poorly staffed and resourced observer mission to monitor the atrocities, but nobody was willing to end the crisis.

In retrospect, it's easy to look back and say something more should have been done. It's easy to justify international inaction by blaming the United Nations, accusing complicated international politics or citing a lack of U.S. political interest in a small country in central Africa. However, the blame for genocide ultimately lies on every single one of us.

With all of the technology connecting

people all over the world and nonstop media coverage that keeps us updated with major events and crises, it's not hard to be numbed from distant tragedies. We become bystanders to injustice and violence as a result of an overwhelming influx of information and images.

As Martin Niemöller explains in a poem he wrote during the Holocaust, "First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out because I was not a Socialist; Then they came for the Trade Unionists and I did not speak out because I was not a Trade Unionist; Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew; Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me."

Twenty years ago the interahamwe came for the Tutsis, and barely anybody noticed until nearly a million people had been killed.

Stories of courage

Throughout the tragedy, stories emerged of heroes facing evil and saving lives.

Carl Wilkens, an American, was serving in Rwanda as a missionary when he was ordered to evacuate with all other foreigners and flee the violence. He instead remained with his Tutsi coworkers and friends in Rwanda throughout the genocide, saving countless lives by relentlessly negotiating with genocidaires and seeking provisions for the injured.

General Romeo Dallaire, force commander of the U.N. Assistance Mission for Rwanda, refused to abandon his mission under any circumstances and eventually convinced the U.N. to deploy a larger force by July.

Not only did his role as an observer to the genocide allow the world to see the mass violence as it occurred, but his troops' mere presence also prevented interahamwe from killing more civilians.

Imaculee Ilibagiz, author of "Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust," was a teenager when the genocide began and was forced to hide in a tiny bathroom along with three other women for nearly three months to avoid imminent rape and murder.

A local priest risked his own life to save Ilibagiz and the other women by concealing their existence in his home until the genocide ended.

Among all of the evil, many people courageously displayed small acts of love and compassion that saved thousands of lives and provided hope for the survivors.

Tragedy remembrance

This week is a national week of mourning and reflection in Rwanda. A flame of remembrance carried by young people will make a nationwide tour throughout the country with memorial ceremonies held at its many genocide memorials.

Although we are thousands of miles away from Rwanda, we must also take a moment to remember the innocent civilians who lost their lives as well as the survivors burdened with rebuilding a devastated country.

After the Holocaust, the United States proclaimed that it would "never again" allow another genocide. Twenty years after the international community ignored Rwanda we must reflect upon how we are fulfilling that promise today.

A common poem found in genocide memorials throughout Rwanda translated from Kinyarwanda says, "If you only knew me; If you only knew yourself; You wouldn't have killed them." Although people identify each other in categories such as Tutsi, Hutu, man, woman, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, straight, gay, rich, poor and thousands of other identities, we must remember that we are all people first.

While a tragedy as drastic as genocide may not be something we can relate to at Elon, its anniversary is an opportunity for us to remember the importance of viewing others without judgment. I hope we can learn to stand up to evil on a daily basis in our community. §

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