

"Don't talk to me about justice"

The Hutus tortured Athanasie Mukarwego's husband to death and then told her: 'You, we will kill with rape.' For three horrific months, literally hundreds of them tried to do just that. 'At a certain point,' she tells STEPHANIE NOLEN in an exclusive report from Kigali, 'I asked myself, Does God exist?' Now, as Rwanda prepares to mark the genocide's 10th anniversary, she can't forget but 'I have to forgive, so things are different for my children'

April 3, 2004, The Globe and Mail

Kigali, RWANDA -- This is, in the end, a hopeful story. You may want to keep that in mind through what lies ahead.

It was Easter vacation. Athanasie Mukarwego remembers that because the children were out of school. She was 35, a high-school teacher with three daughters and a son. She was married to Canisius Kanimba, a public servant, and they lived in a hilltop suburb of Kigali, in a house that was small but had a magical view looking down on the city. She had recently had a miscarriage, so her spirits were a bit low, and the thick clouds of the rainy season matched her mood.

On the evening of April 6, 1994, Ms. Mukarwego heard on the radio that a plane carrying Juvenal Habyarimana, the dictator who had ruled Rwanda since 1973, had been shot down on the way back from a meeting in Tanzania to discuss a peace accord with the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF).

Mr. Kanimba went out to talk to neighbours, and returned at about 11, telling his wife that the streets felt strangely unsafe. The next day, the radio carried a government order that citizens stay inside.

"I knew the president was dead, but I couldn't imagine the consequences." Even now, Ms. Mukarwego's soft voice carries wonder at what happened next.

She went out into the yard the next morning; the rough red-dirt road was empty, except for heavily armed militia members. "They gave me a look that pierced me - I went back in the house."

A few hours later, a local official came to the house and, flouting Rwandan custom, didn't even knock on the gate. Mr. Kanimba, a devout Catholic, was reading the Bible when the man barged into the house. "Why aren't you at the roadblock with all the other men, with their identity cards?" he demanded. Militia members had closed their road.

Ms. Mukarwego suddenly became certain that her husband would die. "He was afraid too, but he tried to hide it. He asked, 'Should I go, or should I try to flee?' But I said, 'If you flee, where will you go?' He said, 'No, I will die like a man. I'll go to the roadblock.' He took his jacket and went."

In his pocket was a small national identity card, which bore his name, date of birth and in the top

left-hand corner the word "Tutsi."

Mr. Mukarwego was at the roadblock for the next seven days, held there at gunpoint with the other men from the street, his Tutsi neighbours. Two or three times, he managed to sneak away briefly to check on the family. "I keep asking them to kill me," he told his wife. "They won't. What I see there makes me wish I were dead."

On April 14, he came home again and deliberately dressed in the shoes he wore to weddings and a new jacket. "Courage," he told his wife. As he was leaving, she started after him, and he turned to tease his independent-minded wife: "Today you follow me?"

"Then," she recalls, "he said, 'Bye.' Just like that."

Later, neighbours closer to the roadblock told her what happened next. The militia men tortured him for a full day. And then they killed him. The neighbours saw his body land atop the swelling pile of corpses. That day, the 15th, a Hutu friend of her husband came to the house, covered in blood, and weeping. "He said, 'Your husband is dead, they made me kill him. This is his blood.' " Her voice turns steely as she remembers the conversation. "I don't know if it's true that they made him do it. Because during the war, men changed."

When they heard the news, her children - the oldest just 12 - began to sob. "But I took heart, I was almost glad. Like it was good news - at least he won't suffer any more.

"I didn't cry. I still can't cry for him."

Athanasie Mukarwego grew up in the Congo. Her parents had fled Rwanda in 1959, the first time Hutu extremists launched large-scale attacks on Tutsis.

The two groups had occupied this "land of a thousand hills" before recorded history. The differences between them are laughably slight to the outsider. Hutus farm; Tutsis herd cattle. Tutsis are taller. Hutus, they say, have flat noses and round faces and curly hair; Tutsis have small-bridged noses, strong jaws, finer hair.

When the colonizers came in the 1800s, they found a country in which Tutsi kings and a Tutsi elite ruled - largely peacefully, though in a sort of feudal system - over the Hutu majority. The Belgians who claimed Rwanda were happy to perpetuate that system.

But in the 1950s, when the Tutsis began to agitate for independence, the Belgians craftily switched sides; suddenly they were in favour of "democratization," of spreading power to the Hutu majority. And when they were granted independence, the Hutus could hardly believe their luck: Long told they were inferior, suddenly they were being allowed to rule. The first waves of violence against Tutsis began.

Ms. Mukarwego came back to Rwanda in 1981, after she had met and married Mr. Kanimba in the Congo. Rwanda was, after all, home, although she had never really lived there. Her husband had been at school with many Hutus who now held high posts in the government, and they weathered the periodic eruptions of anti-Tutsi violence largely untroubled.

In August, 1993, Mr. Habyarimana's government signed the peace accord with the RPF, a rebel army made up mostly of Tutsis backed by Uganda (and indirectly by Uganda's chief patron, the United States). The deal promised an end to the war that had simmered in Rwanda's north.

But something else was in the air - a new ideology whose proponents called it "Hutu Power." Newspapers and the government's Radio Mille Collines increasingly warned of the danger posed by the RPF, saying Tutsis (about 13 per cent of Rwanda's eight million citizens) aimed to seize control and exterminate Hutus. In increasingly blunt language, government figures exhorted Hutus to arm themselves. Gangs of militia held rallies in the cities - they would soon become the Interahamwe, "those who attack together."

It remains a mystery who shot down Mr. Habyarimana's plane. The Hutu government blamed the RPF, of course - and so did a French inquiry, which released its results two weeks ago. (The flight crew was French.) But in Rwanda, many people suspected the Hutu Power cabal that seized control after the assassination - because the president was making "too many concessions" to the RPF. Because they needed an excuse to launch the war.

There is another mystery, of course: What happened in Rwanda? No amount of fear-mongering, or theories about a cowed and submissive population, explains what went on in the next 100 days. Hutu men killed their Tutsi wives. Hutu women with Tutsi husbands killed their children (who by law inherited their father's ethnicity). Hutus who refused to slaughter family or neighbours were killed as well.

It takes extraordinary commitment, energy and effort to kill at least 800,000 people in 100 days, when almost all the killing is done with machetes. The shattered skeletons from Rwanda's mass graves illustrate just how many blows it takes to kill a person. When the Interahamwe could not get through a crowd, they chopped the Achilles tendons of those who remained to ensure that they could not flee, and then came back for them after a meal or a rest.

The radio exhorted Hutus to kill Tutsi men. A different fate was set out for Tutsi women.

For three days after she learned of her husband's death, Athanasie Mukarwego stayed in the house with her mother-in-law and her children. And then on the 18th, a group of men came. They pounded at the doors, some at the front, some at the back, and then burst in. They herded the family members into their small salon. Each was told to sit in a chair, and soldiers pressed guns to their chests.

"One of them said to me, 'Show us the money your husband left.' I got up and started to walk to the bedroom, and several of them followed me. When I got to the door, one of them kicked me, here" - she rises and shows how the kick to her lower back made her sprawl forward - "and then another hit me with the gun, on the head. I saw flashes, and I don't remember the next bit."

She woke up in a nightmare. She was naked, lying on her bed, except the mattress was gone and the bare wooden planks pressed into her back. "One of my feet was off on one side, the other on the other side, and this group of men was standing at the end of the bed looking down at me like savages. One said to me, 'Écoutes, madame. Your sisters have been killed with grenades and with guns and with machetes. You, we will kill with rape. Did you know that it kills too?'

"I thought I would die right away. But I lived."

Her three-by-five-metre bedroom was full of men. She assumed that her children were already dead; there was silence in the rest of the house. The first man climbed on top of her. "I screamed. It hurt."

She pauses. "It went on day and night. Day and night. They brought busloads of militias."

Athanasie Mukarwego was raped by hundreds of men, men who lined up in the room, standing over her and masturbating while they waited their turn, men who lined up in the hall. They came on buses: militia members shipped into the city, who got off the bus at her house and waited in line. It went on for 89 days.

Many of the men who raped her came splattered in blood from "the work" - the killings. They left the blood smeared on her body. "I went three months without putting my clothes on. After a couple of days, I couldn't even cry. I was thirsty, hungry, swollen, nauseated, my head ached, I had a fever. At a certain point, I asked myself, Does God exist? We were always taught that God loves us - He would not have let me live through this. Clearly, He does not love me."

Some of the men who pushed into her body told her how they intended to punish her. "They said, 'You will die of AIDS. Others have died of it. You will die like them.' " As the weeks went by and this went on, she grew ever thinner. "They would joke, 'You see? It's AIDS.' "

She was never allowed to rise and bathe. She looks into the middle distance and marvels at this now. "I stank," she says bluntly. "The smell was horrific. They ejaculated in me, one after the other, 20, 30. And not one of them ever hesitated, ever said, 'This woman is dirty.' "

Her children, she had realized, were not dead: The walls do not reach the zinc roof of the house, and she could hear them in the next room. That meant, of course, that they also heard her screams. A day came when, briefly, there were no men in the house. She decided that she must die, and she must kill her children to spare them from this fate. She tried to get up but could not get her legs together. When at last she rose, a foul, viscous stream of blood and ejaculate poured down her legs. She was weak and dizzy.

She wrapped herself in a cloth she found on the floor, and crept to her children's room. "I asked myself, 'How will I kill them? The oldest first, or the youngest? My son, or my daughters?' I knew I had to do it quickly. I fell to my knees and begged God, 'I doubted your existence. You set for me to be tortured. You know how I have suffered. Grant me this thing, the courage to end this.' And I heard a voice, saying, 'Patience, patience.' " She decided, then, not to kill them.

Moments later, a young neighbour came in - a Hutu who had been at the barricade with the killers. But Ms. Mukarwego knew him well; she had often cared for him as a child. "He said, 'You won't sleep tonight. Tonight is the night they kill the widows; the time of the children has not come. Tonight, they do the widows.' And he told me to come and hide at his house. My mother-in-law said, 'You must go.' "

Weak and terrified, she limped to the neighbour's house. He led her into a bedroom, where a shiny new machete was waiting. "He said, 'Do you mourn your husband? . . . Now you must fight for your life.' He grabbed me by the neck - and then he raped me too. The whole night."

The next morning, she crept out while he slept, and home again. She could not tell her mother-in-law what had happened. And soon enough, another busload of Interahamwe arrived outside her door. "It went on. I was in another world."

But she became suddenly, brutally conscious, when one afternoon she heard her 12-year-old daughter Grace scream out "Maman!" Soldiers had dragged her out back, intent on raping her as well.

"Grace called out, 'Forgive us. We won't be Tutsis any more!' "

Ms. Mukarwego sat up in the bed and quickly counted the men in her room - there were eight. She seized a machete from the floor and said, "Cut me in eight pieces so you can each have one. But leave my children." And one of the men went out to the back and had Grace released.

The men would not let her leave the room to relieve herself, although when she gave in to the need to urinate she found that her vaginal area was so swollen and damaged she could not. She does not remember eating or drinking, although she must have, to have stayed alive.

She remembers only once, when one man came to her room with his pockets filled with groceries. She counts off the list: a litre of cooking oil, a kilo of sugar, a kilo of rice, a bag of maize. "He gave it to me and said, 'Courage. Give it to your children.' I said, 'How can one who comes to kill me bring food for my children?' " The man had no reply. She could not eat his food; he took it to the back room, to the children.

A few nights later, soldiers came and began to beat her. They hauled her outside toward a mass grave dug on the hill just behind her house. At the edge, a soldier shoved her to her knees. "Speak for the last time," he jeered. Ms. Mukarwego did. She remembers every word.

"I said, 'When I see you with your youth, your strength, I feel pity for you. You could use it to protect those who need protection, but you use it to kill. We are innocents. There is not even a stick in my house. No one ever received so much as a nasty look in my house. And yet you will kill me. The others who died were innocent. And we will all go to another life, one you won't have.' They said to each other, 'Why isn't this woman afraid?' I said, 'All who live must die.' "

And then, inexplicably, they sent her home. A few hours later, another bus came.

And then it was July. The Rwandan Patriotic Front took Kigali. The Hutu militias fled. The killing stopped. And the last man left her bedroom.

"I don't really remember anything until two or three months after the war. I was sick. It was as if I didn't recognize the house, I couldn't move, I didn't want the kids near me. I didn't want anyone near me. Especially men."

She would learn later that all the Tutsi women on her street had endured the same fate, as part of a large-scale campaign of gang-rape. "There was Jeanne, there was Claire . . ." she counts them softly on her fingers. Ten all together. The other nine have all died of AIDS.

After the war ended, Ms. Mukarwego sought treatment for what was diagnosed as a severe uterine infection. Drugs cured that, but nothing could fix her other problems.

"I smelled sperm everywhere. The water I drank, the air I breathed, it all smelled of sperm. It made me vomit." It was years before that began to abate. She dreaded going out in public, sure that people were laughing at her, nudging each other and whispering, "That is the one who was raped."

With her husband dead, and four children to feed, she needed to work. But she could not bear the idea of going back to her school. "Those students I taught - how many of them became génocidaires? Maybe some of them came and raped me. Many of my colleagues were killed by their students."

Instead, a friend helped her find a job managing the supply office of a large public hospital. Then another friend took her to the Polyclinic of Hope, set up by the Rwandan Women's Network to treat victims of sexual violence during the genocide. It was a revelation.

"I saw many women in the same situation as me. I saw that life could continue. That you could still have hope." She became a regular at group counselling, and felt the sharp, constant pain in her chest begin to ease.

There was one thing, though, that kept Ms. Mukarwego from embracing that new hope. For four years, she had had intense pain in her vagina. She was sure she knew what it was: AIDS. She saw the ravages of the disease all around her, its death march through Africa accelerated in Rwanda by the mass rapes.

Finally, in 1999, she went to a clinic and asked for an HIV test. "The doctor came back in and he said, 'Your results are negative.' And I just stared at him. So he explained, 'You don't have HIV.' And I said, 'But that is impossible. Me? I don't have it? You've made a mistake. I was raped by more than 500 men. Your machines don't work.'

"I told him what had happened to me. And he said, 'Well, do you believe in God?' I said, 'Yes.' And he said, 'So believe in this result.' "

She went back the following year, and the year after that, to be tested again. All the results were negative. Somehow, after being raped night and day for three months, she escaped AIDS.

She had never discussed the rapes with her children. "The older ones suspected, though they didn't ask. They were embarrassed." Only her youngest daughter Diane actually asked what had happened. "She would say, 'What were you doing in that room - I saw so many men go in the room.' I told her that I took them in the room to give them the money her father left.' "

But the fib backfired: Diane was angry. "She said, 'Did you have so much money, when we were dying of hunger?' " Ms. Mukarwego gives a bitter smile. "So I said, 'I was trying to keep them from killing us.' "

After that first negative HIV test, however, she felt she had the strength to tell her children the truth. She bought several bottles of Fanta, as a treat, and sat with them at the table. "I was happy - they could tell that the air had changed. I told them the whole story. They cried and cried, and I said,

'Don't cry of sorrow, cry for joy. I have this' - and I showed them the paper with the negative result. Then they cried even harder."

Ms. Mukarwego went on living in the house; she says she had no money to move, and anyway, where would she go? She went on sleeping in the same bedroom: the house had only two, and she could not bear to put her children in it. But she developed a ritual: each night she would lock the door, and then act out a fight with a room full of imaginary rapists. "This time I have the strength, the power. Now you'll see my machete!" She finished by lifting and shaking the mattress. "I would dump their corpses on the floor. And then I slept well."

On the side of a hill in a neighbourhood called Gisozi, labourers are hard at work on Rwanda's national memorial to the genocide. It is a graceful yellow building, with a rose garden and stained-glass windows. The city government chose to put the centre here because Gisozi is also the site of one of Kigali's larger mass graves. At least 60,000 people have been buried here, their corpses plucked from ditches and latrines around the city in the wake of the killing. Coffins often hold the remains of up to 50 people, their bodies so devastated it is impossible to match skull with spine or femur.

Mr. Kanimba's is among them. His wife came to Gisozi again and again to look at the recovered remains until one day she recognized the shreds of cloth clinging to a long, thin skeleton - they were from that new jacket he'd put on the last time he left the house.

A mass funeral will be held here on Wednesday, the 10th anniversary of the day the killing started, declared by the United Nations as an international day to remember the dead of Rwanda. A half-dozen African presidents will attend, as will Lieutenant-General Roméo Dallaire, the Canadian who headed the UN peacekeeping mission during the genocide. In 1994, he tried and failed to bring international attention to what was happening.

A decade later, the prime minister of Belgium is the only western leader who will be at the commemoration of the genocide. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan admitted last week that, as deputy secretary-general at the time, he failed to heed Gen. Dallaire's pleas and so bears responsibility for failing to halt the genocide. He is not coming to the ceremony.

But Ms. Mukarwego will be there. "I go every year. It hurts horribly. But I have to go."

Eighty-one of the organizers of Rwanda's genocide have been indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, which sits in Arusha, Tanzania. The tribunal has detained 66 of those indicted, and convicted 20 people of crimes against humanity. The court's budget for this year is \$177-million (U.S.), almost one-third of the operating budget for the entire country. Like many survivors, Ms. Mukarwego is infuriated by its grinding pace and exorbitant costs.

"They're like men living in paradise. It's as if they've been rewarded for what they did. Why does the international community let them rest in Arusha? Why aren't they here, before the eyes of those they attacked, so that we can testify?"

An additional 80,000 people, some of the foot soldiers who obeyed the radio orders and went out to kill their neighbours, friends and wives, are in jail in Rwanda. The country's prisons are grossly overcrowded; more than 80 per cent of the inmates held on suspicion of genocidal killings.

And so last year the government made the controversial decision to release 30,000 people, those who had confessed, and sent them back to their villages to face traditional justice. Every "cell," the smallest unit in Rwanda's elaborate structure of municipal government, is holding inkiko gacaca, or "grass trials" modelled on the traditional method of settling disputes beneath a tree before village elders.

The cells elect juries of 19 "reasonable persons" (mostly women because so many of Rwanda's men are dead, jailed or have fled) and meet each week with people from the community to consider the case of one or two accused. Perpetrators, victims and witnesses sit all mixed in together beneath the tree (like the killing, the surviving is intimate in small, overpopulated Rwanda) and get to their feet one by one to say, "I saw you chop him with your machete" or "You were with the men who came to my house to take my child."

The men who killed Canisius Kanimba are in jail, but Ms. Mukarwego does not expect to see any of those who raped her on trial. "They came en masse. They came from all over. I was terrified - I could never identify them."

None of it, the tribunal, the crowded jails, the gacaca trials, eases her anger. "Don't talk to me about justice," she says flatly.

In July, 2002, Ms. Mukarwego began a new job, as the co-ordinator of a little project called the Village of Hope: 20 houses for women raped during the genocide and infected with HIV, run by the same group from which she once sought help. "After lots of counselling, support, love and care, I had the courage to look after other women who hadn't had what I had."

In the village, she oversees a small centre that teaches tailoring and print-making and knitting, so the survivors can earn an income. And, twice a week, she presides over huge meetings on the lawn outside that draw hundreds of poor women from the region. Ms. Mukarwego stands in front of them, all their weary widows' faces, and tries to impart the information they receive nowhere else: about AIDS, family planning and even the legal system. In 1999, with so many women left as heads of their households because of the genocide, Rwanda passed a law that, for the first time, permitted a woman to inherit property from her husband or father.

"The work I do, it's like a medicine, it's like a cure for what I've lived through. It helps a great deal." She looks 30 instead of 45, her face is unlined, and when she is amused, she giggles like a teenager. "I'm good, these days," she says simply.

Today, her identity card does not say "Tutsi." Ethnicity has been removed from the cards as part of a sweeping series of changes brought in by the RPF's "government of national unity."

A National Unity and Reconciliation Commission has overseen a mammoth task: rewriting the school syllabus so children are taught about equality and human rights. And removing the elaborate systems of quotas and rewards that penalized Tutsis. And resettling hundreds of thousands of returning refugees -Tutsis who fled before 1994, Hutus who fled after. (Government housing deliberately mixes them all up together. "Even if they don't want to talk," commission head Fatuma Ndagiza explains, "they have to go and get their water from the same well and send their children to the same school.")

The commission is also struggling to integrate the old Rwandan army, the Hutu militias and the RPF into one national force, although it remains dominated by the former Tutsi rebels.

The government insists there is only one nationality here today, "Rwandan." (And yet it is probably no coincidence that the RPF's general-turned-president, Paul Kagame, appointed a cabinet of exactly 15 Tutsis and 15 Hutus.)

It is officially taboo to discuss such things, and yet questions of ethnicity still dominate life in Rwanda. Tutsi survivors resent the way Mr. Kagame and his fellow exiles (most of whom spent years in Uganda and speak little French) dominate the new power structure.

Hutus who had family members killed because they did not support Hutu Power resent the way they are left out of the national memorial. And Hutus whose family died at the hands of the RPF (believed to have killed at least 200,000 people while chasing the Hutu militias into the Congo and thousands more in reprisals in Rwanda) simmer with anger over the way Mr. Kagame has "played the genocide card," as they say here, and kept all examination of RPF behaviour out of the tribunal and the national debate.

And so, for all the novel and quite admirable ways the government tries to promote reconciliation, it looks impossibly far away.

"It's like it happened yesterday," Ms. Mukarwego says. "I see their faces. I smell each one of them, the smell of the ones who raped me.

"It's like a film before my eyes. It never turns off - in the shower, at the table."

In principle, of course, she favours reconciliation: "I have to forgive, so things are different for my children." And yet every morning, when she walks out of the house, through the gate in the low wooden fence and down the hill toward the Village of Hope, she passes the fathers and the wives of the men she knows killed her husband.

"I just try not to look at them. I know they're there, but I try not to see them. That's Rwanda."