

The Hell of Rwanda

UNKNOWN

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I arrived at approximately 0745 at Kibeho Camp by UN helicopter with journalists from *Reuters*, *Magnum* and *Die Deit*.

The RPA [Rwandan Patriotic Army] at the first roadblock, located between the helipad and the ZAMBATT [Zambian Battalion] Company HQ, denied the journalists access to not just the camp, but also to the ZAMBATT Company HQ.

As I was in uniform, we agreed that I would go into the camp and find out what was going on and return and brief the journalists later that morning.

At this time, across the hill, we saw a man being chased by two armed RPA down the hill—he was shot at a few times, but not hit and a few minutes later, apprehended.

Throughout the rest of the morning, there were sporadic bursts of gunfire either into or above the crowd, or at specific persons trying to run through the cordon.

On entering the camp. I first made my way to *Medécins Sans Frontieres* [Doctors Without Borders or MSF in French] building, located next to the ZAMBATT Company HQ. On entering the compound, I faced approximately 50 persons with severe, fresh machete wounds to the head, face, neck, back, arms and legs. There appeared to be only two local MSF staff on hand, with no medical supplies and there was not much they could do.

I then passed by the back of the ZAMBATT Company HQ where the Zambians showed me an IDP who had tried to hide in one of their pit latrines and was buried up to the head in excrement and was either dead or unconscious.

By 0825, I had made my way along the road towards the ZAMBATT Company HQ location, found in the centre of the camp. The crowd was very tense—likely from being packed together as they were, but also from four days of little sleep, food and water, horrendous sanitary conditions, night machete attacks and fear of their future, but specifically, I would say, as a result of the sporadic gunfire that was occurring.

At 0830, I witnessed a man trying to run through the cordon past the RPA. He was shot in the back at very close range by an RPA soldier chasing him. I tried, along with two Zambian soldiers, to get over to see if he had survived, but we were prevented from doing so by the RPA.

For the next hour-and-a-quarter, I made my way to the back of the ZAMBATT Company HQ location, but due to the crowds, was unable to gain access to the compound. The crowds were crushing up to the compound and there was a general tenseness and misery about the situation amongst the IDPs.

At some point, I saw another man being shot by the RPA as he tried to run down a hill. Again, we were denied access to his body, but within 15 minutes, he had been buried on the spot by the RPA.

During this time, ZAMBATT soldiers began to move the very frightened crowd back from the ZAMBATT company location. This was a slow, but steady process. People were generally confused, fatigued and despondent. As they passed by us, some would indicate that if they left their throats would be cut, others made halfhearted attempts to walk towards the RPA who pushed them back into the crowd and others were dehydrated enough to drink muddy water from plastic sheets strewn about the ground. Many children had lost their parents and were wandering around aimlessly.

A UN truck had been overtaken by the crowd and men could be seen atop the cab and others trying to get in. It had to stop as it made its way towards the compound due to the density of the crowd.

After assisting in directing people back, I made my way through the crowd to the ZAMBATT compound. I had been in Kibeho on Wednesday and Thursday that week, but never had the crowd been packed together so tightly. It was essentially a question of forcing our way through

the crowd and for the first time in my many visits to Kibeho over that past week and over the past three months, I distinctly felt that there was an air of danger, fear and tension among the IDPs.

As we pushed our way through the crowd towards the entrance of the compound, the crowd cleared, but only because the road was covered in bodies of dead, dying or injured people—to the point where it was impossible not to pass by without at some point stepping on someone. I would estimate that there were about 20 people: men, women and children, laying in front of the compound. However, these were injured not by bullet wounds, but rather machete wounds or having been crushed, suffocated or dehydrated.

I finally gained access to the ZAMBATT compound and over the next two and one quarter hours, we assisted with bringing in injured people—some with machete wounds to the face, having babies/children, both alive and dead, passed to us from the crowd and giving what water we had to the sick and dying. Some of the ZAMBATT soldiers would go out into the crowd and help bring in bodies or injured people. They also were able to clear the pile of bodies at the front entrance, by bringing them into the compound. They also provided a sense of stability to an impossible situation and kept the crowd as calm and organized as they could. However, with the sporadic firing taking place at all points of the camp, as the morning went on, the situation appeared more and more grim. Some healthy men fought their way into the compound, but were apprehended by ZAMBATT and pushed outside the barbed wire perimeter.

At approximately 1035, the ZAMBATT compound received fire to the degree that we all immediately dove behind sandbags for a few minutes. It is impossible to say whether the fire was directed at us, but is certain that it passed all around us—no one was injured in the compound, but could have been in the crowd.

At 1045, I confirmed with an UNREO [United Nations Rwanda Emergency Office] representative who had made his way illegally past the cordon and into the compound, the MSF, UNICEF [United Nations Children's Fund], Save The Children, etc. [aid workers] were all being blocked by the RPA cordon and no medical assistance was getting in.

By this time, there were over 125 people inside the compound to whom we were providing safety, security and sanctuary as well as humanitarian and medical assistance as best we could. I counted 35 dead babies/children that were lined up in the compound. Of the other victims, I would say that the majority were still alive, however, about a 15 adults and youths were dead from trampling, suffocation, dehydration, etc. There were also about 75 children sitting in the compound. Throughout, the ZAMBATT troops were providing water to them and those in the crowd and generally maintaining some semblance of control around the compound, in fact, doing a magnificent job given the conditions.

At approximately 1100, the prefect of Gikongomo [Province located in Southeast Rwanda] drove through the crowd and through the compound, accompanied by [the] RPA. He continued on towards the transportation/screening point at the opposite end of the camp.

Shortly thereafter, I watched another man shot who had been walking past the compound down the hill at the back of the ZAMBATT location. Again, we were denied access to his body and he was buried by [the] RPA within five to ten minutes on the hillside in a shallow grave.

Throughout this time, there was sporadic gunfire throughout the camp. Also, I could see that people walking through the screening point towards the transportation points—as they were, they were being beaten severely by [the] RPA with long, heavy sticks and rifle butts.

In the opposite direction, in a clearing on the hill, a woman was beaten to the ground by three RPA [soldiers] with sticks, then chased and beaten back up into the crowd. If you are wondering why we couldn't do anything, these occurrences were taking place hundreds of yards and tens of thousands of people away, and our hands were full taking care of the sick and dying around the compound and also providing security to the compound. At the same time, ZAMBATT soldiers would venture into the crowd to assist those that they could do.

More people with machete wounds stumbled into the compound area and we had them sit in the shade of some UN vehicles in the area. By this time, the women and children were hiding under the vehicles inside the compound.

At 1150, more shots were heard around the camp, this time a more serious and intense volley—the crowd was bordering on panic.

At 1155, a severe rainstorm approached the camp and by 1200, the rain started coming down hard on the crowd. The ZAMBATT soldiers held their positions at the barbed wire perimeter of the compound shouting to the crowd to stay where they were and calm down—others helped move the 35 to 40 dead babies/children into the building for dignity from the rain.

As the rain beat down and the crowd shifted for shelter, heavy gunfire erupted from all over the camp. Within one minute, despite the best efforts of ZAMBATT soldiers to prevent it, the crowd poured over the barbed wire and overran the outside part of the compound, which included the jeep I was in. They did not make it into the walled part of the compound.

Our vehicle instantly disappeared under the crowd. We couldn't see outside the windows or the windshield due to the people crushed against the car, on the hood, on the windshield, on the roof and under the vehicle. For the next one-and-a-half hours, we remained in the vehicle, not only physically unable to open a door for the crush of people, but when I started to roll down my window for air, people tried to force their way inside.

The firing continued from 1200 to about 1250, relatively continuously, then died down to sporadic fire. The people on the roof had broken our antennae so we could not send messages out about our situation, but as we were about 20 yards from a UN truck that had three ZAMBATT soldiers on the cab keeping people from overtaking it, we remained inside the vehicle rather than risking the impossible of forcing our way out of the vehicle and through the crowd.

At about 1300, someone told us through the window that people were being macheted in the crowd behind the vehicle—one minute later, a man's face appeared in one of the windows, split in half with a machete.

Throughout, people were passing babies and children above their heads towards the ZAMBATT compound, which may explain the 250 abandoned children found there later.

At about 1330, the crowd was still crushed together, but two ZAMBATT soldiers forced their way to the vehicle and using sticks, were able to clear a path for us towards the end of the camp. As they did so, they had to pick up and remove bodies from before us, and as we passed, the crowd swallowed up any space that had been provided.

By 1345, we were at the transportation point outside the perimeter of the camp. Sporadic firing could still be heard. After waiting for instructions for about [an] hour, then we were told to go to Butare [the district capital of the province of Butare located in Southeast Rwanda].

On the road to Butare, we measured a 13-kilometre steady stream of IDPs making their way along the road. They were being beaten by the RPA with sticks, were being stopped and having what little possessions they had with them taken, and were being forced to run down the road by the RPA chasing them. On more than one occasion I witnessed local civilians along the sides of the road beating the IDPs [Internally Displaced Persons] as they passed by.

At this point, I stopped being a witness to the events, but am told that at approximately 1730, heavy firing into the crowd took place for an extended period, including machine gun firing, grenades and, I am told, mortar rounds.

Source: Unknown, *Eyewitness to Peace: Letters from Canadian Peacekeepers*, Alex Morrison, and Steven A. Torrisi eds., (Clementsports: The Canadian Peacekeeping Press, 1998). Reprinted by permission of the publisher.