

Testimony on the resistance at Bisesero

Name: Siméon Karamaga

Cellule: Bisesero

Sector: Rwankuba

Commune: Gisovu

Préfecture: Kibuye

Profession: Breeder

Marital Status: Widower of the genocide

Age: 53 years old

The people who live in the Bisesero region are known by the name of Abasesero. We were cattle breeders. There was not a single person who did not have a cow. There were three well-known tribes: the *Abanyiginya*, *Abakono* and *Abahima* tribes. Each tribe's great grandfather was still alive.

I am from the *Abanyiginya* tribe and our great grandfather is called Sebikara. He was the head of the tribe. Bijeri is the great grandfather and leader of the *Abahima* tribe. Rukwirangabo is the great-grandfather and the leader of the *Abakono* tribe. The three tribes formed a very close-knit community. Their children used to marry each other from the other tribes and anyone who wanted a husband or wife did not need to look further than the three tribes.

A sign and the river Ryimpundu separated the two Biseseros because there was Bisesero of Gisovu and Bisesero of Gishyita. Despite the fact that we live in two different communes, we are still close.

The genocide of the Tutsis began in 1959, when I was an adolescent. We made sure that we were able to defend ourselves in order to protect ourselves and our cows. Nobody could find a way of either stealing our cows or burning our houses. In 1962, the Tutsi massacres began again but needless to say we managed to chase the enemy away, even though they had guns. In 1973, the genocidal killers returned. They burned two of the Abasesero houses. We were furious and we took our spears and bows. We put the fires of the two houses out. The houses actually belonged to Seruhongore and to Muyubi. The genocidal killers were afraid of us and they left us alone. The Tutsis from other regions were killed and their houses were burnt down. The surviving Tutsis left the country but all of us, except for a few families who went to Zaire, remained in Bisesero. We later killed the thieves who had tried to steal our cows. People from other regions who saw how we managed against the slightest resistance, believed that we were very strong men who could not be defeated by anyone.

We remained in Bisesero and looked after our cows. Our weapons were clubs. Umusesero's characteristic is a club in one hand. Even a child cannot go out without a club. Just as guns have different names, so do our clubs. We have clubs which are called *intobo*, *ingongo*, *ingabe*, *isanzu* and *umushabarara*. The name of each club corresponds to the name of the tree which it comes from. There is a market at Nyarushishi in the commune of Gisovu, where we sell our good-quality clubs. We have specialists who choose good clubs for battle.

At the beginning of the genocide in April 1994, many Tutsis came to Bisesero from other regions because they thought that the area was safe. Everyone thought that the military would be unable to attack the Bisesero area because we were warriors. However, this was not so. The militia attacked us at the very beginning of the genocide.

On 7 April 1994, the militiamen came to the office of the commune of Gishyita and they proceeded to attack Bisesero of Gishyita. That morning we took our clubs,

machetes and spears and we went to try and drive back the attack that the militiamen had launched on us. We succeeded in doing this only after having lost nine of our people. This was because the militia had guns. Despite this advantage, they ran away in retreat. After they had gone, we realised how serious things were becoming. We decided that we should all stay on just one hill so we left with our children and our goods, and most importantly our cows.

There were too many of us on this particular hill which was called Muyira. Everyone could do as they wished. We decided to choose some people who would be able to lead us especially when there was an militia attack. We wanted to choose someone who was not afraid and who would be able to spur us on, someone who also had experience when it came to battle. We therefore appointed Aminadabu Birara as commander. He was a wise man and as old as I. He lay out a plan for us to follow so that we would be able to repel the militia. Birara was amongst the Abasesero who had taken part in the battle of 1959. Unfortunately, he was killed towards the end of the genocide in Bisesero.

I was appointed his deputy and I was in charge of my own sections. The militia were always dressed in white when they launched an attack. When we saw them coming to attack us, I would go in front of everybody (the Tutsis) and ask them to lie down. The militia would approach us, shooting as they advanced. When they saw that we were all lying down, they would come up to us. I would ask the Abasesero to get up and go amongst the militia. In this way they would not be able to throw grenades nor could they shoot us with their guns because there was a risk that they would kill their own people.

Our commander Birara, would stay behind everyone to keep an eye out on those who were afraid. He would hit anyone who refused to advance. Women and children were also obliged to bring stones and clubs. Our commander would try and hide the Abasesero corpses during the fighting so that the others would not suddenly become frightened.

Often we managed to repel the enemy quite far back. I liked to be in front of the others. I would sometimes have to tell the Abasesero to retreat if I saw that we were becoming scattered or that we might fall into the enemy zone.

Each time we fought a battle with the enemy, we would meet on the Muyira hill to sum up the day's events. There were some young people amongst us who were there to help direct the others during the battles. The young people we chose to do this were Augustin Nzigira, Birara's son, who is now dead; Aron Gakoko, who is alive; Efasto Habiyambere, who is also still alive and Habimana, now dead.

In the evenings we would therefore gather together and allocate new tasks to one another. We needed a lot of strength to work, so we would slaughter the healthy cows, drink **la sauce chaude** and then eat the meat. This gave us back our strength.

One group was in charge of the cooking whilst another group would watch out for the enemy so that they could not creep up on us unawares. Other people were in charge of burying our people who had been killed. We also constantly restocked our supply of stones.

It rained all the time and we did not get a lot of sleep but we still managed to remain positive because we saw how well we were defending ourselves against the militia despite the fact that we had no guns. Instead we used our clubs. A militiamen who received a blow from this died immediately.

We went back to our properties before the 13 May 1994, and we began to farm. At night we would still meet on the same hill. We were hopeful that the militia would not be able to kill us. We had managed to kill policemen and soldiers and we took their guns although we did not know how to use them. The men who were in

charge of the militia were Obed Ruzindana, the bourgmestre of Gisovu and the bourgmestre of Gishyita as well as many other militiamen. They would come in Obed's car and the cars of some of the shopkeepers.

On 13 May 1994, a large number of militiamen and soldiers from Gitarama, Gisenyi and practically the whole country arrived in buses and trucks. They surrounded us and shot at us persistently. Many women and children were killed that day especially since many were unable to run. My wife, Marthe Nyirahategeka and my seven children as well as my grandchildren were killed that day.

The militiamen were always dressed in white and they wore green plants on their heads. They were like madmen. That day they managed to kill many of us. The hills were covered in dead bodies. They returned the next day to comb through the bodies. The militiamen also took away our cows and they gathered everything we had grown from our fields.

A small number of us hid in a hole. It was difficult to organise ourselves and we were hungry since we had had nothing at all to eat. Even so, in the evening we all met on the hill to try and raise the young people's spirits so that they could carry on running and fighting. We had suffered a lot. At night we saw dogs and other animals who came to devour the bodies. During the day crows would come with the militiamen to come and eat the bodies as well.

No one took pity upon us. When the militia attacked us, they begged us not to run so far. If they killed us easily they would be rewarded by Obed Ruzindana.

Every single day the militiamen came back to kill us in Bisesero. Fortunately the French soldiers arrived at around the end of June 1994. They came in white cars. In the hole, we had radios and we had heard that French soldiers had come to Rwanda, more specifically that they had arrived in Cyangugu, Kibuye and Gikongoro.

When we saw their cars arriving, the Abasesero, including Anastase, Amoni Nyakayiro and Bimenyimana (otherwise known as Kamenyi who was killed after the genocide by infiltrators) went to stop them. We all emerged from our hiding place. Eric, who could speak French, explained who we were. The French took photos of us. The militia were there with them, carrying their weapons. The soldiers then left and said that they would be returning. When the French had gone, the militia came back to kill. They killed a lot of us that day because many people had come out of their hiding places when they had seen the French soldiers.

Three days later, the French returned. They gathered us together on the hill. We sang religious songs in glory of God "Nyemerera Ngendana Na We Myami...", which means "Lord, let me come to your side". The people who were ill, were driven to the hospital in Goma (Zaire) by the soldiers. A few weeks later, we were put in cars and driven to the RPF zone in the commune of Kivumu (Kibuye). After this we went to Kabgayi.

After the RPF took over the whole country, we returned to our hill in Bisesero. For the first few days, we stayed at the office of the commune. We then built huts on our hills and tried with great difficulty to start life over again. We had no materials so we were obliged to fetch them. On our way to fetch wood, we could see our own children's skulls. We have tried to accept that our life will be difficult without our children or wives, but what hurts us deeply, is that the militiamen still want to kill us, even now. We are unable to sleep. They attack us all the time. At the beginning of February 1997 the militiamen killed some survivors. They had been with us during the genocide, in the sector of Gitabura in the commune of Gisovu. They were hit over the head by machetes, just like in April 1994. We lost all faith in life.

Before the mass influx of returning militiamen from Zaire and Tanzania, we felt safe. Some of the militiamen's families who had stayed behind on the hills, were given

money so that they could farm for the survivors. We were unable to do it ourselves because we no longer had the strength and many of us are now disabled because of the genocide. Many of the survivors also began to marry Hutu women.

When the militiamen came back, no one continued to farm for us. The families were very happy to see their brothers coming back and looking so healthy. The militiamen did not lose a thing during the genocide but they are the ones who receive all the help. Everyone who has returned from Zaire or Tanzania, must go to the office in the relevant sector to collect goods and materials such as plates, blankets, cups etc...Some white people even came along to check that everyone had received the necessary utensils. As for us, no one came to check on us.

Prior to the genocide, Abasesero was full of strong men. The few men who remain today will die of sorrow. We cannot foresee the future of Bisesero. We are beginning to rebuild houses but if the houses are finished, we will need wives to have children with so that we can carry on the name of "Abasesero". We need this so that we will be able be protected.

When talking about reconciliation, we do not feel that we can be reconciled with people who have killed members of our families and who persist in trying to kill us. All we want to hear is the officials say that they have finished punishing the genocidal criminals. We stay on our hill and we do not prevent anyone from living their lives the way they want to. Someone has to tell us exactly what we have to do to be reconciled. Do we have to offer beer to the militia to show that we are reconciled or do we give our cows, which is a sign of friendship, to the genocidal killers? They are the ones who cannot bear the fact that we are still alive. Ultimately we need justice. I have put all my trust in God because I am still a Christian.

Interviewed in Musenyi (in the sector of Musenyi), 8 February 1997.