

# Bisesero: Stronghold of courage during the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi

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Bisesero warriors Kayinamura [Karamaga Simeon](L) and Aron Gakoko were among the Tutsi who resisted repeated Interahamwe attacks during the 1994 Genocide against Tutsi in Karongi District. Photo by Sam Ngendahimana

Based on testimonies from survivors of the Bisesero resistance, many spoke of the overwhelming numbers of killers compared to the victims, and the extraordinary courage of the Tutsi who resisted.

A notable account comes from Issa Bayiringire Dany, a Bisesero survivor, who

described the intense, unequal battles in which Tutsi civilians fought back using stones and traditional weapons against heavily armed soldiers and militia during the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi.

Despite facing firearms and superior military force, the Tutsi were able to mount pockets of resistance that lasted several days, sometimes even weeks. In various locations, survivors describe hand-to-hand combat with the assailants. Bisesero stands out as a place of exceptional resistance.

The killings perpetrated in the rural community during April, May, and June 1994 hold a unique and important place in the history of the genocide against the Tutsi.

Many who fled to the hills of Kibuye fought courageously for survival amidst fear and hope. Remarkably, they managed to defend themselves and even killed some of the local genocidal militia assailants.

Most of those targeted for extermination resisted as best they could. Survivors often referred to their struggle as “the war of stones against bullets” before succumbing in large numbers. What makes Bisesero particularly

famous is the organization of its resistance and its duration, despite the overwhelming opposition. Ultimately, however, the Tutsi in the area could not match the attackers' firepower. Their prolonged struggle, though courageous, extended their suffering. Estimates suggest that out of 50,000 people, only about 1,000 survived. The killers came not only from Kibuye and Gikongoro but also from Cyangungu, Gisenyi, and Ruhengeri. The Tutsi from Bisesero resisted until the end of April, killing several of their attackers, including policemen and militia members.

Attempts to resist the genocide occurred across the country. However, the machinery of murder continually evolved, adopting new strategies that left victims with little chance of escape. In the hills overlooking Akanyaru River, even those hiding in bushes, banana plantations, or sorghum fields were often discovered, sometimes with the aid of hunting dogs.

Meanwhile, along the borders of Butare, Gikongoro, Cyangugu, and Kigali provinces, those attempting to flee to Burundi encountered patrols organized by local inhabitants on both sides of the river. In Kibungo region, the borders with Tanzania were closed. This shows that the organizers of the genocide aimed to extend their destructive reach beyond Rwanda, reflecting the extremist ideology that portrayed the Tutsi as a regional

threat.

While thousands of Rwandans participated in the killings, a smaller number risked their lives to save others. Some survivors recount how a number of Hutu individuals cooperated with the Tutsi to repel the militia. Many of these life-savers acted out of friendship, family ties, or moral conviction, protecting, hiding, and helping the Tutsi to escape.

The Hutu and Tutsi have coexisted for centuries, sharing profound cultural ties. Inter-marriage was common, and in some cases, Tutsi women and their children survived because their Hutu in-laws refused to reveal their whereabouts. Matrilineal traditions also played a role: children born to a Hutu father and Tutsi mother were often recognized as Hutu, which sometimes shielded them from persecution.

It is important to note, however, that rescue efforts were systematically discouraged by radio stations like RTLM and Radio Rwanda. Some Hutu families who hid Tutsi were themselves mistreated or killed at the outset of the genocide.

The ideology driving the genocide branded those who helped Tutsi as traitors and accomplices. The pervasive climate of fear, denunciation, and execution meant that few dared to intervene, despite acts of courage.

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