

# Slim Pickings At Rwanda's Deadly Checkpoints

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## **Chris McGreal on the road from Gisenyi to Kibuye, western Rwanda**

THE temptation on being approached by a young man wearing a fake fur coat and red wellingtons in tropical temperatures is not to take him very seriously. On the road to Kibuye that would be a mistake.

The fur-coated youth was polite, even when he asked : "Are there any Tutsis here?" But were he to have discovered any, the array of weaponry displayed by his companions suggested that it was not just the Tutsis who were done for.

Across government-held Rwanda the French army is clearing "militia" roadblocks supposedly set up in self-defence against the advancing rebels. Most are not even within firing range of the front.

They are there to hunt down members of the minority Tutsi population who have escaped the militia-led genocide. When French troops arrive to clear the roadblocks, the militia is compliant. The barricades come down, weapons are confiscated. But where the French have yet to tread, passing through is a dangerous exercise.

The 75-mile stretch of mountain road between Gisenyi and Kibuye is clogged with 24 militia barricades. Each must be judged by the mood of

its guards. Some are manned by young drunks who randomly accuse passengers of being Tutsis and wave guns and machetes in their faces.

These days they also tend to mistake any white foreigner for a French soldier. In their military paraphernalia, they salute and try to make out that they too are soldiers. Guns are not always visible, machetes always are. Some militiamen wield huge clubs that probably kill with one blow.

Other roadblocks are less visibly threatening. A schoolteacher was in charge of one in a village where he was possibly the most educated resident. He wanted to try his passable English and carried no gun. He was officious as he checked for victims. But behind him was arrayed a selection of young men waiting for his word to kill.

At some barricades the militia stared into the faces of the Rwandans, perhaps searching for a hint of Tutsi, perhaps for the kick of instilling terror.

The Rwandans papers were pored over. It is the paperwork that gives the militia roadblocks their air of legitimacy. Not all Tutsis fit the stereotypical view of them as tall and beautiful. Ownership of a dozen cows was sometimes enough to label someone a Tutsi.

An elaborate web of passes is needed just to move a few miles down

the road. Anyone without the necessary permission is hauled aside. Every car must have its own manifest, so getting a ride is almost impossible.

The barricades are frequently decorated with hastily fashioned French flags, and signs praising President Mitterrand for intervening. Others denounce Uganda and Belgium for supporting the rebels. In areas where French troops have passed through they have often met with a rapturous reception from people who believe the soldiers are there not to rescue the remaining Tutsis but to shield the Hutu majority from the rebel Rwandan Pa-

triotic Front. In Gisenyi, whole schools lined the roads waving flowers as the French arrived.

But the atmosphere is likely to sour if the French do what they have promised the United Nations. Already the discovery of mass graves in town after town has cooled the reception. The militias are not happy as the French draw Tutsis from their hiding places and offer them a means of escape.

But the militia cannot be too disappointed. At the barricades they rarely find Tutsis these days. In this part of Rwanda most are already dead.