ADDRESS BY PRESIDENT PAUL KAGAME

U.S. National Prayer Breakfast Gathering

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I was invited here today to answer a simple question, a question that any Rwandan should be an expert on.

After a country loses a million people in a genocide, how do you repair that country?

I have asked myself this question for the past thirty years. Every Rwandan has. And I still don't have all the answers.

We lost ten per cent of our population over the course of three months in 1994, because the government of the time said the only way to save the country was to kill all the Tutsi, down to the last infant.

What is a Tutsi? Surprisingly, there is no easy answer to that question. But at that time, all that really mattered, is that a Tutsi was a Rwandan who was marked for extermination.

I am going to tell you a bit of that story, and also about how we stopped the genocide, and have worked to eradicate the evil at its root, and prevent its transmission to a new generation.

Today, against all odds, our country is peaceful, flourishing, entrepreneurial, and most importantly, united.

But Rwanda's experience is more than a story. It is also a warning. A warning about what happens when we allow hatred to triumph over humanity.

We see divisions growing all across the globe, in every kind of country, no matter its level. Even here, in this exceptional nation.

But there are no people in this world who are more exceptional than others.

A genocide can happen, when a society loses faith in the future, when it loses faith in the power of faith itself, and when it can no longer distinguish truth from deceit.

A genocide can happen, when political leaders preach division and hatred, while people of faith and people of science remain silent.

The story I am going to tell you is about Rwanda, but it is also universal. And the world has not yet learned the lessons which Rwandans have had to learn, at an unimaginable cost.

Like countless other Rwandans, I was driven into exile at the age of four, at the time our country was gaining independence. We grew up in refugee camps, stateless and forgotten, with constant reminders that we belonged nowhere. We were even being told, that Rwanda was full and that we would never go home.

Within Rwanda, discrimination against Tutsi became official policy, against the backdrop of total indifference from the international

community. And that included, I am sorry to say, the endorsement of church leaders in Rwanda, with few exceptions.

In 1990, we took our destiny into our own hands, and moved to liberate Rwanda from ethnic dictatorship, and recreate a homeland for all Rwandans, without distinction.

Incidentally, Congressman Slattery, at that moment, I happened to be in your beautiful state of Kansas, studying at Fort Leavenworth, as an officer in the Ugandan army. I immediately left the course to join the struggle, and from that moment onwards, as a Rwandan military officer, serving my homeland.

In April 1994, just as the peace agreement was about to be implemented, extremist radicals reacted with a final solution to kill all Tutsi, and mobilized the population to carry it out. Every Tutsi became a target for murder. Any Rwandan who opposed the genocide was also marked for death, and many paid the price.

By July 1994, our forces had stopped the genocide, but not before a million Rwandans lost their lives.

Almost every Rwandan was displaced and bereaved. All public institutions were destroyed. The harvest was ruined, and there was no money to rebuild. We were even expected to repay the money the genocidal government had borrowed to purchase machetes and guns.

The desire for retribution was huge. As the commander, to keep my own emotions in check, I had to order my officers, at a certain point, to stop showing me the mass graves.

We could not allow people to take justice into their own hands. We had to break the cycle of violence, and convert the urge for vengeance into a national program of unity and reconciliation.

But reconciliation itself comes with a cost, which is why it is often so difficult to achieve. Hundreds of thousands of people deserved to go to jail for life, or even be hanged, by any measure of justice. But we had to find a way to repair those people and make them part of society again. We abolished the death penalty.

We therefore had to ask the survivors of genocide for the impossible, in order to restore our nation. To swallow their anger and bitterness. To live together again with those who they had watched murder their loved ones, as their own children flourished.

I could not ask anything of the perpetrators. Only the survivors had something left to give: Their forgiveness.

We have turned the corner in Rwanda, but the same ideology that justified the genocide against the Tutsi is still alive and well in our region. And we see the same indifference from the wider world as in 1994. It is as if those expensive lessons are always lost, and we stare blindly, as the same type of situation builds up again and again.

Reconciliation is painful but necessary, and it requires humility and confidence in equal measure. Most importantly, it requires dedicated leadership, which reaches out to all elements of society.

Reconciliation is an act of faith, because it requires a leap of the imagination: A belief in the unseen, in a reality which all your senses tell you is impossible. It means envisioning a new nation, free of hatred and injustice, and turning that dream into flesh and spirit, day by day.

The function of leaders is to give people the trust to suspend disbelief, for as long as it takes to transform the mindsets of the next generation.

Throughout this period, I constantly questioned myself. As Rwandans, we doubted ourselves. And for the rest of the world, Rwanda became a metaphor for the worst side of human nature.

But Rwandans refused to be defined by that.

Leaders are there to absorb that pain and bear the weight of doubt, not to create more pain and use doubt as a weapon for political ends.

This is also the reason why faith leaders were key partners in our effort to rebuild after the genocide.

Reconciliation does not always mean resolution. In Rwanda, we do not all agree. The decision to forgive is ultimately a private act of each individual.

But reconciliation does mean that our society has committed itself to never again go back to that dark past, no matter what.

Healthy nations are those where we always strive to put the politics of unity and peace above all else, no matter how many times we fall short of that ideal.

Joseph, as you recall, was sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers. But he rose to the pinnacle of Egyptian society, because of his integrity. As a result, he later found himself in a position to save Israel, including his brothers, from famine.

It is the practice of reconciliation, in matters large and small, which creates and recreates healthy nations, and turns strangers and enemies into a family of citizens.

That is Rwanda's constant work, today and every day.

I thank you all so very much for listening.