

# Rwanda Through The Looking-Glass of a Cosy Hotel

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**By Chris McGreal in Gisenye**

## **Eyewitness**

There are not many who think of the residents of the Meridien hotel in Gisenye as victims of Rwanda's civil conflict. But, as members of the beleaguered government, that is what they would have the world believe.

The core of the dispersed administration forced to flee the capital has retreated to the hotel on the northern shores of Lake Kivu, yards from the Zairean border and about as far as you can go and remain in Rwanda.

The interim president, the prime minister and most of the cabinet are surrounded by soldiers in what amounts to the interim capital of the less than half of Rwanda they still control.

In some of the rooms lives are bargained for. Individuals with enough influence or cash seek documents to rescue people from the slaughter, usually Tutsis in hiding. They try to buy passes, or army guards, for safe passage through the militia roadblocks, in the hope of smuggling a relative or friend to safety.

In other rooms, remnants of the administration try to wash their hands of responsibility for Rwanda's tragedy

and persuade the world that it has got it all wrong.

The health minister, Casimir Bizimungu, is among those leading the effort to absolve the government of responsibility for the murder of hundreds of thousands of Tutsis.

Some, such as the foreign minister, invariably speak harshly of Tutsis. Mr Bizimungu is more subtle, but his message is the same. He deplores the "horrendous" slaughter, but despairs that the outside world cannot understand that Tutsis murdered by marauding militias have brought it upon themselves by backing the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which restarted the war.

"They are responsible for all of this", he says. "The RPF resumed fighting immediately after the president's plane was shot down, and the tensions were so exacerbated that in different districts the people began killing each other. Who is responsible? The RPF and the Tutsis."

He has confused the chronology. The militia began picking off the government's political opponents and the ethnic minority within hours of President Juvenal Habyarimana's death. The resumption of the war was a consequence of the massacres, not a cause.

But he is not deterred. He promises to “talk very sincerely”, and relates a bizarre catalogue of alleged Tutsi and RPF plots.

The RPF military leader, he says, notified the United Nations of the rebels’ intention to murder Mr Habyarimana, and the UN covered it up. And, he insists, the Tutsis were planning the mass murder of the Hutus before they themselves fell victim. “It’s very unfortunate that you come here when I’ve been waiting for a document from one of the government security services taken from homes of Tutsis.”

“Those documents show clearly there was a plan for a number of months to identify people who should be massacred, people who are not on the RPF side. People were being taught ideologically how to hurt and kill the Hutu.”

Some might find it remarkable that, in such circumstances, the overwhelming number of victims were those supposedly plotting the killings. But Mr Bizimungu is not concerned about that. What he is keen to do is to make sure that his government does not get the blame when the UN begins to investigate the genocide.

He says there was nothing it could do to stop the killing, because the army was busy fighting at the front.

- French special forces yesterday evacuated 43 nuns from Kibuye, western Rwanda, who had been living in terror for 10 weeks threatened by machete-wielding thugs who staged mock executions. Government soldiers and extremist militias massacred thousands of people, mostly Tutsis, in Kibuye who had sought shelter in the church and stadium.