

Kwibuka25: Why the focus is on the youth

Nasra Bishumba

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Dr Bizimana during the interview. Emmanuel Kwizera.

Rwanda has recorded significant progress in rebuilding and rehabilitating its citizens twenty-five years after the Genocide against Tutsi.

However, majority of the citizens still suffer the consequences of the atrocities.

Ahead of the 25th Commemoration of the Genocide against the Tutsi, *The New Times*' **Nasra Bishumba** sat with the Executive Secretary of the National Commission for the Fight against Genocide (CNLG), **Jean Damascène Bizimana**, who reflected on the country's 25 year journey towards recovery and priorities for the future.

Excerpts

Rwandans will this year mark 25 years since the Genocide against the Tutsi. Can you paint a picture of what the days leading up to the D-day ; April 7 will look like in terms of what is lined up ?

The preparation for the 25th Commemoration of the Genocide against Tutsi is ongoing and in fact some of the activities have already started. Most of our activities are focusing on the youth, especially with regard to teaching them about history. For instance, we have an exercise where we pick 500 youths from each province and the City of Kigali starting with January and this programme will end March. We are targeting 2,500 youths. That activity, which we call “Youth, Know History”, involves the youths visiting the Kigali Genocide Memorial in Gisozi and the Museum for the Campaign to fight against Genocide at Parliament.



Youths hold the Light of Hope during a previous commemoration event at Kigali Genocide Memorial. File.

After that, they are joined by experts who they ask questions regarding the country’s history, genocide and genocide ideology. This helps them to go back in their homes, school and places of work with answers that they can share with their peers. What we are aiming for is that by the time of commemoration, we need these children, the youth to know what genocide is and how the country has rebuilt itself in the last 25 years. We also provide public dialogues in secondary schools and universities and we look into fighting genocide, genocide ideology, and genocide denial plus the role of the youth in supporting national development. We are also hoping that the 25th commemoration period is an opportunity to educate the world about our history on the international level, talking about the genocide and see how the world can draw lessons from our experience. We will have an international

conference in Kigali from April 4 to 5th and it will bring together about 500 experts, politicians, international organisations from all over the world. We will also call on the youth to visit 'Incike' who are based in Huye, Nyanza and Bugesera districts to fetch from their well of experience on the values of heroism, patriotism, defending the country's honour and resilience. There will also be an activity to clean up memorial sites all over the country and that activity will end on March 30. They will be cleaned up by the youth who will even then be talked to about history at that time.

This year, there has been some changes regarding what is usually done in the commemoration week. Could you shed some light on the changes and what motivated them ?

In the last two years, we have reduced the number of dialogues to three between April 7-13. This year, we are marking 25 years since the Genocide. That means that the grief has reduced and the country has been rebuilt. That is the reason we always insist on "Remember, Unite, Renew" because when you are rebuilding, it helps people to continue working hard for the families, for tourists to continue flocking in and for the country to continue to get a source of taxes. It's for that reason that we have now reduced the dialogues to two; with one running on April 7 from 9am to 12pm. Then we will have another one that may be on April 10 in all villages and this will end what used to happen in the past, where business would come to a standstill. If for example you have a company, you can decide to send a number of your staff there and the rest can continue working. While government institutions, ministries and private sector used to pick a day out of the 100 days of commemoration to hold their dialogue, this year, they will pick one day out of the seven days running from April 7 to April 13 to do that. The main focus is on this week and then people can work but also visit survivors and memorial sites at their own pace.

What is being done to incorporate Genocide studies as part of education programmes in Rwanda and beyond? There appears to be studies that only focus on previous genocides. How can we add the 1994 Genocide against The Tutsi to modern day curriculum ?

A lot has been done. Led by the Ministry of Education, stakeholders like CNLG, Aegis Trust a lot has been done but, most importantly, we were able to come up with a specific teaching guide which will give teachers the direction they need to start imparting this history lesson. We will start with secondary schools because we felt that children in primary schools are too young to grasp genocide related lessons. The second most important step

is to train teachers to be confident to teach about the genocide. There are teachers who fear delivering these lessons because their parents committed genocide crimes and they teach in the same districts where these crimes were committed. It is not easy to mention your family's crimes. Then we have teachers who are Genocide survivors who are still hurting deeply and find it difficult to teach this particular lesson. However, as years come and go, these educational guides are being used in universities and teacher training colleges and since they are young and were not involved in the genocide, it is becoming easier. In the past, the teachers were directly connected to the history and this used to cause fear and it gives us hope now than ever before.

In the past, your office has said that genocide ideology was their biggest challenge. Where does the country stand right now and what has your office been doing to continue your mission to change mindsets? What are the current trends of Genocide denial and what do they show us?

We conduct research about genocide ideology every five years because it is within a number of years that you can quantify something. The last research was conducted in 2015 and it indicated that genocide ideology had reduced by 87.3 per cent and that is really a big percentage. In another two years, we will conduct another research to determine where we stand. What is evident is that it has significantly reduced and other indicators that we usually rely on like how many court cases are filed per year have reduced. One other highlight is that the genocide law drafted in 2013 regarding genocide ideology and other related crimes was amended and it made some articles that had loopholes clearer. For example, there was an article that said that genocide ideology could be prosecuted only if it happened in public. This meant that if for instance someone sent a survivor insulting, hurtful and pain inflicting messages using a mobile phone, they would get away with it. Right now, whether you use an SMS, WhatsApp or even email to send such messages are punished by a minimum of five years. Then there was sensitisation done by different stakeholders like grassroots authorities, Ministries of local government and education, National Unity and Reconciliation Commission and CNLG all work together to conduct dialogues with the masses and over time, this has helped. Good governance has also contributed to the significant reduction of genocide ideology. If the masses rights are being respected, they are getting what to eat, getting access to health facilities and those who want to study can study, and then you will have a population who are going to fight anyone whose ideology is not constructive.

Last year, you said that you were struggling with the lack of preservation experts to help you preserve remains of the Genocide victims. How far have you gone in terms of getting for the right skills to help with this ?

Projects regarding preservation of memorial sites rarely get funding as compared to others like, for example, agriculture. This could be because donors have their own priorities but, for us, it's important because the foundation of every country is its history and culture. We applaud the Government for the effort that it puts in ensuring that memorial sites are taken care of. We have a Memorandum of Understanding with Germany's Hannover and Hamburg universities who have experts, especially in the area of preserving bodies. We started off with Murambi Memorial Site where they are using their expertise to gauge how much water and oils, among others, are involved to determine which remains will be preserved for a long time. On April 21, these experts will present the findings of their research and what we are required to do. The German experts are also equipping Rwandans in the University of Rwanda's Medical Faculty and others from the National Forensic Laboratory with the skills required to preserve the victims' remains, clothes and others. We also have a Memorandum of Understanding with the America's University of Pennsylvania who send experts here and are currently working with Ntarama Genocide Memorial where they have spent two years training CNLG staff on how to preserve victims' clothes. Preserving clothes also requires a lot and most of what is required is not available locally. For instance, the chemicals used must be purchases from Thailand or Europe. They will also present the findings of their project in May. It is then that we will know what can be preserved and what must be buried.

The issue of trauma is still a challenge. What in particular is being done to deal with this issue, especially among the youth, some who were not even here during the Genocide ?

A study conducted by CNLG and the Ministry of Health which was released in December last year indicates that all Rwandans have a degree of trauma but those who survived the Genocide are suffering more. There are also people who committed genocide who are struggling with trauma because they never expected to be held accountable for their actions. There are those who served their sentences and are genuinely remorseful because they have to live with the knowledge of their actions and it has caused them trauma. Their children also face trauma because they have to deal with the fact that one or both their parents is in jail for committing such heinous crimes and

also face the people whose families were slaughtered by them. The survivors have obvious reasons why they are traumatised. They were hunted down, their families were killed, they have to live with both physical and emotional pain so it is understandable that during the commemoration period, trauma cases shoot up. The issue of poverty also contributes to trauma. That is why working with other organisations, we strive to bring them together in cooperatives where they can have income generating activities but also find solace in discussing their issues with people with the same background because loneliness can also cause trauma. We are working with Ibuka this year to conduct a survey to find out how much of the vast pieces of land owned by genocide survivors can be used productively so that they can benefit the owners.

The issue of children born out of rape continues to be a controversial one. Their parents continue to raise a complaint of those these children who are not being considered as bonafide beneficiaries of the Fund for Support to Genocide Survivors. Is there something you can say about that ?

The first and most important thing people need to understand is that FARG helps Genocide survivors. This means that women who were raped during the Genocide are supported fully but let it be clear that the children that they gave birth to are not survivors because they were not here during the Genocide. However, people need to know that these particular young adults are being supported through other means, especially at the grassroots level. The ministries of Justice and Local Government, CNLG and FARG discussed this issue and it was decided that first, their number must be established. What is really important is that the parents and children come to terms with what happened. There are those still in denial because some women who were raped and impregnated have failed to come to terms with what happened. Some of these survivors have not told their children the truth of how they were conceived only for them to find out on their own, and again, bring about the issue of trauma. Talking to them about the value of being open about what happens is a continuous process.

Rwanda has slightly over 200 memorial sites. These have proved to be a challenge to maintain them, what is being done to address this ?

A lothas been done. What we had before was one article in the 2008 law that talked about graveyards and memorial sites. However, in 2016, the law regulating memorial sites was enacted. The law gave CNLG the mandate to

care for the national memorial sites and the rest were left in the hands of districts. We have other memorial sites outside the country ; three in Uganda and two in Tanzania. They are a responsibility of the foreign affairs ministry. The fact changed how these sites were being cared for because they apportioned direct responsibility which was not the case before. Today, there is a budget for memorial site maintenance and that was not the case before. On the other hand, we are waiting for a ministerial decree that details how some of the memorial sites, most which share a history can be combined for better maintenance. Some of the sites are in complicated locations or in small places where even commemoration events cannot take place. However, from the area where they will be moved from, we will leave a monument talking about the history of that place can never be forgotten.

Over 900 arrest warrants have been issued for Genocide fugitives ; however, only 23 have been enforced. Why is that and what do you have to say to the international community ?

There are different reasons. First of all, it's expensive. It requires them to send teams of people to Rwanda to conduct investigations and, in the end, they choose not to pursue it. Then, you have cases of people who committed genocide but completely changed their identity, so tracking them down has been difficult. Then there are countries that are not so keen on doing anything about these perpetrators at all. What was done was to continuously call on international organisations to fight impunity, to pursue the suspects and to enact laws to fight and punish genocide. So far, the United Nations, the United Nations Security Council, the African Union, the European Union have all adopted these laws. What remains now is to push them to deliver.

Most countries, especially in Europe, did not have laws to punish genocide crimes committed by a foreigner on foreign territory. However, we also encourage them to extradite the suspects if they can't try them.

What message do you have for Rwandans and the rest of the world during this commemoration period ?

Remembering what happened is deeply painful and while we must remember our loved ones, I call upon everyone to remain strong, to look at the bigger picture and not to allow the pain to consume our lives. It is important for us to come together to build a united country because this nation belongs to all of us.

The second message I have is for adults who continue to poison children's minds. When we visit schools to talk to these youngsters, they ask us many questions, some which are laced with hatred, segregation and genocide

ideology.

There are things that a 10-year-old cannot know unless someone has told them. I am calling on adults who are imparting this kind of damage in our children to stop this because hatred has never bore good fruits. What these children need to know is love, peace and justice.

editorial@newtimesrwanda.com