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Rwanda, Conflict

Rwanda: A Country on the Mend

Imagine two neighbors fighting with each other to the point where they start killing each other because of their different ethnicities. Unfortunately, this is what happened with the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups in Rwanda, ultimately creating a genocide within the country. The Rwandan genocide has led to food insecurity in all ethnic groups in Rwanda.

Rwanda is a landlocked country and is one of the smaller countries in East Africa. Although it is smaller in a geographic area, it is one of the largest populated countries in Africa. It is home to around 12.8 million people. In comparison, Rwanda is about the size of Massachusetts in the United States. It borders the far larger and richer Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as its closest East African neighbors, Tanzania, Uganda, and Burundi. There are three different ethnic groups in Rwanda: Hutus make up 85%, Tutsis make up 14%, and only 1% of the population is the Twa. About 75% of the population is rural and 25% Urban (“Divided by Ethnicity”).

Even though Rwanda is by the equator, it is not that hot due to its high elevation. In a journal posted by the University of Pennsylvania, they say “Rwanda’s land is typically hilly, though there are also swamps and extensive Mountain areas” (“East Africa Living”). It is a tropical country and its typical daily temperature averages 76 degrees Fahrenheit.

Rwanda’s soil is pretty fertile, especially in the Northwest region. A journal from the University of Pennsylvania says, “About 30% of Rwanda's land is suitable for farming, and another 30% for grazing” (“East Africa Living”). These crops mostly consist of potatoes, sweet potatoes, maize, and beans and around 70% of the working population is employed in agriculture (“Rwanda at a Glance”). The main exports are tea and coffee and their main imports are refined petroleum, gold, and raw sugar (“Rwanda (RWA) Exports”).

The typical family size in Rwanda is four people (“Average Household Size”) and their housing is not the best. Most families live in rural areas and their houses are beehive-shaped and made of mud, bricks, and poles. However, in recent years, the government has been making an effort to improve these housing conditions since they are not suitable for raising a healthy family (“Rwanda - Housing”). Most people work in agriculture in Rwanda and the average wage is around 692,000 RWF per month which is just over 706 United States dollars (“Average Salary in Rwanda 2021”). Rwandan people mostly eat what they grow on their farm so they do not have a balanced diet.

Most of the population in Rwanda struggle to provide the basic needs for their families, although, over the years, it has gotten better. An article by the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund writes, “Only 57% of the population [has] access to safe drinking water that is within 30 minutes of their

home” and most of the population has access to a toilet (“Water, Sanitation and Hygiene”). When people drink badly contaminated water, this could impact their health for life, especially as a child.

In Rwanda, 98% of children are enrolled in primary school while only 71% complete their education (“Education - Rwanda”). Only about 35% of people have access to electricity in Rwanda as well (“Access to Electricity”). All of these living conditions are challenges for the Rwandan people, but the biggest problem that Rwanda faced was the clash between the Hutu and the Tutsi.

Rwanda is a presidential democracy and has three branches, just like the United States. In the executive branch, the president’s term is seven years (Chepkemoi). Since Rwanda gained independence in 1962, it has always been a presidential democracy. Before this, they were ruled by the Belgians (Chepkemoi). But the country was governed by political parties associated with the Hutu majority. Under Hutu rule, the Tutsis faced discrimination and violence, and thousands fled to neighboring Burundi. It is estimated that by the mid-1960s, half of the Tutsi population was living outside Rwanda (“Divided by Ethnicity”). Before this, the Belgians favored the Tutsi and even gave them certain advantages over the Hutu. This upset the Hutu people. This further divided the groups by requiring all Rwandans to carry identity cards that classified people by their ethnicity (“Divided by Ethnicity”).

Even with so many Tutsi fleeing to neighboring countries, the small percentage that stayed tried to cohabitate within the same community as the Hutu people. The two groups speak the same language which is Kinyarwanda, follow similar traditions, and live side by side but there was still a longstanding history of tension between them. On October 2, 1990, a civil war broke out when Hutu extremists blamed the Tutsi population for the country's increasing social, economic, and political pressures.

Between April and July 1994, at least 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutus were slaughtered when a Hutu extremist-led government launched a plan to murder the country's entire Tutsi minority and any others who opposed the government's policies (“Divided by Ethnicity”). This was roughly 70% of the Tutsi population that had stayed in the country (Gwin). During the genocide, 150,000 to 250,000 Tutsi women were raped (“Rwanda: A Brief History”). Many of these women that survived contracted HIV/AIDS from their abuse.

The conflict also affected the environment because forests were burned and fertile soils were destroyed which caused erosion. The Hutu people were the majority group that was mostly farmers. The Tutsi people were the minority group at the time and mostly consisted of ranchers. Many were left in ruins after the three-month attack.

The genocide ended when the Tutsi-dominated rebel movement, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), captured Kigali, the Rwandan capital, overthrowing the Hutu government and seizing power. After the RPF victory, UN troops and international aid workers arrived to help maintain order and restore basic services. A new multi-ethnic government was formed on July 19, 1994, which promised all refugees a safe return to Rwanda. This is an important event in Rwanda’s history because it still impacts the country today.

In an article written by Krishna Panchal, the Rwandan Genocide was essentially a government-enforced event. Government officials forced the Hutu communities to gang up against the Tutsi people. The government-mandated massacres revealed the political instability that Rwanda was going through and the major impact that left on the nation's people" (Panchal). As the healing begins, maintaining political stability is key to the nation's government and its people.

In an article written by World Vision, the author states, "39% of the population lives below the poverty line" (Reid) due to the after-effects of the attack leaving them without homes and land to farm. Malaria also became a huge issue because of the poor environmental management and poverty within the people of Rwanda (Moodley).

Even 27 years after the massacre, the pain from the brutal event can still be felt by the population of Rwanda that was not even born then. The rebuilding and mending of these two groups have been nothing but a small feat but obtaining an equal partnership within the government and the ethnic communities has been evident. A picture taken by Jon Warren for the 2015 World Vision Edition shows two men, Andrew and Callixte, who were enemies during the genocide holding hands and are now best friends (Reid).

Today, the RPF is the majority in the Chamber of Deputies and, for the first time, two opposing parties, the Democratic Green Party of Rwanda and Social Party Imberakuri, won two seats each in the parliament which makes for an even government party. Following an amendment to the constitution in December 2015, President Paul Kagame was re-elected to a seven-year term in August 2018, allowing him to serve a third term ("The World Bank in Rwanda: Overview").

One of the first things the government did after the genocide was eliminated the ethnic designation on national identity cards, that were mandated by the Belgians. Also, the national census no longer tracks ethnicity, so no one truly knows how many Hutu or Tutsi actually live within Rwanda anymore. The government has encouraged people to no longer use these labels on their own, and it's widely considered impolite to ask someone about their ethnic background. If you ask someone from Rwanda what they are, he or she will likely answer Rwandan (Gwin).

After the genocide, the people of Rwanda realized that they needed to come together to build up the country's economy again as well. Many people were still living in poverty and people were food insecure. Panchal also writes, "One of the main plans of the Rwandan government under President Kagame is known as Umuganda. Umuganda is the practice and culture of self-help and cooperation in which communities would come together to help one another rebuild" (Panchal). This method was successful in bringing the communities back together and revamping the entire nation.

Each local village keeps track of who attends the monthly projects and those who fail to participate without being excused risk fines and some could even be arrested. An article written by Megan Specia states, "the community identifies a new public works problem to tackle each month. This compulsory work is emblematic of a broader culture of reconciliation, development and social control asserted by the government" (Specia). Every able-bodied Rwandan citizen between the ages of 18 and 65 must take part in community service for three hours once a month.

Another plan adopted by President Kagame was the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission. These groups are in charge of creating reports and reviewing how well people of different ethnic groups were living with each other. This was to help ban “genocidal ideology” and all hate speech. This has helped groups move past their harsh past and played another key role in bringing the communities together as one country.

Today, the country of Rwanda is one of the top countries when it comes to women’s rights (Hunt). Since this event, they have made huge steps to resolve this conflict between the Hutu and Tutsi people as well as women’s rights. The Parliamentary elections in September 2018 saw women fill 64% of the seats. This has been a solution that Rwanda is taking because it gives women more of a say within the country and represents women throughout the government.

With the support of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, Rwanda has been able to make important economic and structural reforms and sustain its economic growth rates over the last decade. One of the most effective once the stability grew in the government was coffee and tea production. It has become the country’s leading exports and has lifted more people out of poverty.

A challenge though still is importing or growing enough food for a densely populated country that is landlocked. Many people still struggle to eat a balanced diet and to get enough food for themselves and their families. But, organizations like the World Bank, the United Nations, and many others have been at the forefront in solving this problem.

Lastly, a solution that could help Rwanda with its current food crisis is different international organizations partnering together like the World Bank, the United Nations, and the World Food Programme to help provide adequate funding and supplies. These materials would help people especially in the minority groups who can not provide food for their families. In fact, the World Food Programme is implementing and managing programs to achieve zero hunger within Rwanda. The United Nations and the World Bank could team up with the World Food Programme to help provide more materials, supplies, and funding altogether to those in Rwanda.

Just as the rest of the country suffers from the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic, so does Rwanda. In 2019, with the help of the National Strategy of Transformation, the economic growth exceeded 10% and was expecting stronger growth in 2020 but because of the pandemic it no longer is. Exports and tourism have taken a hit. The World Bank Group provided \$14.25 million in funding to help the government prevent, detect and respond to the pandemic.

However, due to the pandemic, poverty is once again on the rise. It is likely to rise by 5.1 percentage points (more than 550,000 people) in 2021. An article written by the World Bank, they state, “The combination of poorer nutrition, limited health services, learning losses from school closures, and the likelihood that some children (particularly adolescent girls and children from poor households) may never return to school because of COVID-19 have the potential to threaten decades of progress in Human capital development” (“The World Bank in Rwanda: Overview”).

I think a combination of these solutions would help the people of Rwanda. I think that Rwanda as a country has been taking great steps to become better and these world organizations are improving the economy exponentially. These solutions would help the whole population in Rwanda because they would benefit the minority groups, as well as the majority groups, and women. The plan of action that I would take is having the world organizations get together to talk about Rwanda's issues that each organization could help with. On the smaller scale of things, the country could keep making steps in the right direction to encourage women and minority rights.

As the world begins to mend from such physical, mental and economic loss from COVID-19, Rwanda is no different except they have seen much worse loss and devastation and then healing from a disaster. It seems the world could actually learn from them and take drastic steps to discourage hate world-wide. With so much volatility between so many different ethnic groups, it would be great if our national identity cards and censuses no longer asked for our ethnicity just as Rwanda no longer does. For example, we are all Americans here in the United States and should be treated as such. We should learn from Rwanda's mistakes and realize how much hate can destroy a whole country. We see how hate even affects the unborn and how its lasting effects last through generations. But if we all commit to a community service project together and work together to accomplish a common goal we can realize that we really aren't as different as we thought we were.

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