

Rwanda: Talking about it helps

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Organization **Kanyarwanda**
Location **Kigali, Rwanda**



Night falls in Kigali. Clouds of smoke peacefully rise from the densely built-up hills of Rwanda's capital. Bernhard* wakes up with a start, bathed in sweat. In his dream, he smells the fragrance of incense. The church of Mburabuturo is crowded. The prayers of the congregation are more fervent than usual. The priest is hearing confession.

People are sleeping on the floor. Others are dozing in the pews. The church is the only place where they feel safe. Bernhard's wife and children settle down for the night. Outside, the people on the street seem strangely restless. Bernhard runs into drunken, loitering militiamen. They demand identification, his cigarettes and his money. When he has nothing left, they taunt him and laugh. They throw his identification into the air. They shove him. Their laughter gets louder, so loud that it wakes him up. It was only a dream. A nightmare.

For Bernhard, the nights are sheer agony. It is then that the 53-year-old former electrician relives the utter helplessness he felt that night in April 1994. He wants to run back into the church to save his family. Inside, inconceivable horrors are taking place. Bernhard wants to scream, to stop the incensed mob. The memories are like a festering sore. His face is drenched in tears. The pain that he manages by day is unleashed with a vengeance in the dark. The recurring nightmares threaten his sanity. He desperately tries to get some sleep.

On a nearby hill in Kigali, images of death plague 51-year-old Cyprien in his sleep. Soldiers chase him around a church with a machete. An evil witch throws human bones into a latrine. These nightmares haunt him. Cyprien is forced to watch the rape and murder of his wife by the Interahamwe militia of the Hutu. They cut the tendons in his hips with an axe. The militiamen think he is dead. For hours he lies on a heap of bodies in a church. He still smells the corpses. He is nearly thrown in a mass grave with the dead. With frenzied laughter, the soldiers stand over the bodies saying, "We'll finish this later." He will never forget those words.



Night after night, Cyprien's horrifying experiences return to him in a confusion of bizarre dreams. Sometimes, when he is unable to escape these thoughts during the day, he feels the past is driving him mad.

Operating since 1991, Kanyarwanda is a Kigali-based organization that is dedicated to the protection of human rights. Since 1994, the Centre has provided medical care, as well as psychological and social rehabilitative services to victims of torture under its CARVITORE programme (Centre Africain de Rehabilitation des Victimes de la Torture et de la Répression).

Marie, now a 34-year-old mother of two, fell into the hands of the Interahamwe in western Rwanda. Each day, when the sun turns its back on Rwanda, Marie's memories return. After dark, she is plagued by debilitating stomach pains and headaches. She still hears the drone of the transistor radio messages of the Hutu militia calling for violence. She jumps at the slightest sound outside the house, fearing they have returned for her. Over a period of three months, Marie was repeatedly raped by five contemptuous, brutal and insolent Interahamwe soldiers.



“What is the point of life if you can never feel joy?” Marie asks. She sends her children to school with apparent indifference. Her two children cannot understand their mother's depression. She believes she will struggle with these feelings of worthlessness for the rest of her life.

During the day, staff members at Kanyarwanda provide Marie with encouragement, knowing the strength that lies beneath her seemingly proud demeanour. With the assistance of the

Kanyarwanda social workers, Marie found doctors who were experienced in treating victims of torture who helped her to identify connections between her physical and mental symptoms that resulted from the torture she suffered.

Since 1991, Kanyarwanda has developed several networks, including one comprised of doctors who treat victims of torture. In many instances, where victims are unable to afford medical treatment, the Centre covers the costs. For many years, the organization has also fought for Rwandan women who were raped during the genocide to be recognized as victims of torture. As a result of their efforts, a network was established to connect seven groups of women from different provinces who were victims of rape.

Tassiana, the 50-year-old Coordinator of Kanyarwanda attempts to capture the magnitude of the genocide through statistics. She recognizes that this provides little consolation for the victims, but argues that sometimes it helps to frame the incomprehensible in numbers. Tassiana removes a list from her drawer. It's her personal list of 94 names. “My father's relatives,” the social worker says matter-of-factly. It took Tassiana 10 years to record her personal losses. “So I don't forget,” she declares resolutely. When her inner demons threaten to get the upper hand, she prays.

“Talking about it helps,” Irene, the Centre’s trauma expert, explains to Bernhard. Despite his shyness, she encourages him to speak about his experiences. Time and again, she has called on him to help with small electrical jobs around the Centre or to request materials. On many occasions, he simply lacks the energy to carry out his former occupation.

Cyprien is the last person to meet with 31-year-old Irene, whose warm smile reflects her unshakeable optimism. As a survivor, Irene believes strongly in the importance of helping others. Over the years, Cyprien has undergone several operations to repair his injuries, arranged and financed by the Centre. Although he now relies on crutches, Cyprien always finds his way to Kanyarwanda. Cyprien notes that if he didn’t have the meetings with Irene to look forward to, he would have gone mad long ago. His conversations with her enable Cyprien to face his life again. Irene encourages him to write down his experiences, which he does with meticulous care in a dog-eared diary. He wants to use these notes to bring the perpetrators to justice at one of Rwanda’s *Gacaca* tribunals, which were influenced by Rwanda’s traditional village courts.

In these courts, lay people were trained to judge and sentence their fellow citizens. The Government hopes that the tribunals will enable the people of Rwanda to come to terms with the genocide. Unlike Bernhard, Cyprien believes in the efficacy of the *Gacaca* tribunals. He hopes that the interrogation of detainees in front of their fellow villagers will lead to the truth and, where appropriate, their punishment. Only then will he have the peace of mind to look for a job like the one he once had as a janitor in a coffee factory.

Irene is trying to find another adviser to join them at the centre. While the staff provides advisory services, they too are survivors of the genocide. Everyone in this tiny East African nation experiences moments when the traumatic memories of the past threaten to overwhelm them: social workers, nurses, doctors, teachers and priests. They all need help at one time or another. Yet, many have demonstrated the courage to cope. There is no mistake that the atrocities committed during those months in 1994 reverberate to this day.

“To date, there has been no legal verdict or other action that could begin to make amends for the barbaric killings,” Tassiana says despondently. And so, the tiny steps the survivors are taking in their daily lives are seen as crucial to their individual and collective survival. It is the only way they will be able to conquer the demons of the night.

“The killing has to end,” Bernhard murmurs. He has been talking to other victims who regularly gather in front of the Centre. He recalls that he was 10 years old when he first heard about a massacre. Then they began to happen with alarming frequency, 1973, 1980, 1994.

“How can you look towards the future when every ounce of energy is invested in trying to come to terms with the past?” Bernhard wonders out loud as he makes his way home at dusk. As the sun sets over Kigali, the images of the past threaten to assail Bernhard, Marie and Cyprien. But with each passing day and with the assistance of the trauma centre, the shadows become shorter and the survivors take their next steps towards hope.