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'Allowing more genocide isn't an option'

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Jacqueline Murekatete has a simple goal - to end genocide forever. A 22-year-old survivor of 1994's genocide of nearly a million Tutsis in war-torn Rwanda, Murekatete has been speaking on genocide in forums all over the world for six years now. And when she calls on "civilization and morality" to come to the rescue of those about to die, she carries an authority born of having witnessed the collapse of both.

"It is not an option to allow the genocide in Darfur to continue," she said vehemently in a conversation with *The Jerusalem Post* in Tel Aviv last week. "It's a matter of practical self-interest," she warns the West. Genocide happened "not just in Darfur. It happened in Asia; it happened in Europe; it happened in Africa. And it can happen in America."

How far does she want the West to go to stop a genocide? "Sometimes military intervention is a necessity, sometimes economic sanctions are enough. The most important thing is that genocide as a crime ends."

Does it matter that Darfur and Rwanda, both unstoppable, took place in Africa, while Bosnia, which witnessed international intervention, saw whites dying? "There's a racial context," she agrees. "People say, 'oh, Africa, they're always killing each other.' There's more pressure [to stop it] in Europe. But people need to realize that what happens in Africa affects the rest of the world." In a more interconnected world, "what happens in Africa and Asia ultimately will have consequences for the West."

Murekatete speaks quietly but firmly, with a poise and free-flowing intelligent conversation that seem older than 22.

She is an orphan, her parents, uncles, aunts and six siblings killed during the 100-day massacre of Tutsis that began in April 1994.

That massacre, like the one taking place in Darfur now, was an attempt - almost successful - of the majority Hutu ethnic group to eliminate the Tutsis in their midst. At the behest of the government, and especially of the government radio service, neighbors barged into the homes of their neighbors and stabbed, raped or hacked them to death.

"Both my parents were farmers, and I had six siblings," she begins, telling her story for the millionth time, but somehow still with a driven urgency. "Growing up, I was very aware that I was Tutsi." Discrimination in pre-war Rwanda was ubiquitous. "Identity cards saying you were Tutsi had to be shown just to go to school, and roll call was separate for Hutus and Tutsis. This was the government's way of discriminating." The constant reminders, official and unofficial, of the distinction meant that "everybody knew who was Tutsi and who wasn't. That's why so many could be killed," she notes, adding that over 90 percent of Rwandan Tutsis were slaughtered in the 1994 carnage.

"Once the government ordered the killing, neighbors could kill neighbors, because everybody grew up in this environment."

From the early 1990's, Radio Rwanda had broadcast anti-Tutsi propaganda on a regular basis, calling the group "foreigners" and "cockroaches."

"When the massacres began," Murekatete continues, "I was caught living with my maternal grandmother in her village." Traveling as a Tutsi was "suicidal," since Tutsis passing through government roadblocks were summarily executed, so Murekatete could not return to her parents' village. "I never heard from them again."

"Then," she continued, "when the massacres reached my grandmother's village, we ran away to the county office," the local seat of government, but the building was not safe from Hutu militiamen. So the pair continued their flight.

One night, while they hid on a farm, a Hutu machete squad arrived and began shouting at the farmer, a Hutu, accusing him of hiding cockroaches. "The man pleaded that we were just an old woman and a child, that we could have been their mother or daughter."

"I don't know how I survived," she relates of the moments that followed. "The men just left." In later years, she adds, she chose to believe in God, because only God could have saved her there.

The farmer, meanwhile, terrified that the men could return and worried his life was already forfeit, told Murekatete and her grandmother to leave. The man told them of a local orphanage run by Italian priests who would take Murekatete in, though they did not take adults "since it would be too risky."

"Since she knew I had more chance of surviving there, my grandmother asked the man to take me there. She told me, 'don't worry, these killings are going to end.' Every day we said to ourselves there's no way these killings will continue. When my grandmother told me this, I believed it."

At nine years old, Murekatete was one of the oldest children at the orphanage, and it remains one of her most harrowing memories. "People came in without arms, with their legs chopped off. Children were screaming because they had seen their parents murdered in front of them. Many of the children were infants." Murekatete, tucked away in the orphanage, survived the massacre. Her grandmother and most of the rest of her family did not.

After the genocide, she learned of one uncle who had survived. He had searched the villages of her childhood for signs of surviving family members, and eventually took her to the United States, where she was granted refugee status and is waiting to receive American citizenship.

In America, at 16, Murekatete began to speak about her experiences and the need to act on genocide. She now runs Jacqueline's Human Rights Corner, a partner initiative of the youth empowerment non-profit Miracle Corners of the World. The program aids the genocide survivors of Rwanda, a country where, according to current government figures, nearly 30,000 orphans live in households headed by children, 40,000 people live without shelter and some 27,500 people are disabled (including missing limbs hacked off by machetes) as a result of the conflict.

Making a dent in the social and medical aftermath of genocide can seem overwhelming. But Murekatete is discouraged - not by the task of rehabilitation - but by the silence of the world during her own genocide, and the inaction during the current one in Darfur, a phenomenon she calls "the history of

silence and indifference."

Yet, when she speaks, "I have been encouraged by the young people's reaction, and their anger, and their belief that a crime has been happening and their leaders can't stand idle and silent."

Perhaps, in a world where genocide can still take place despite indignant remonstrations by international bodies, it is helpful that a young voice from one genocide survives to shame us about another.

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