

Listening to **RWANDA'S SURVIVORS**

Last year two survivors of the Rwandan genocide visited LSE to give a series of talks about the 1994 massacres which left an estimated one million dead. During their visit, arranged through the LSE Annual Fund, **Serge Rwigamba** and **Patrick Iregura** talked to Claire Burke about the problems the country faces today as it struggles to recover.

'It's hard to talk of reconciliation while survivors are still suffering'

Serge Rwigamba and Patrick Iregura were both 14 years old and living in the capital Kigali when the genocide in Rwanda began. The young boys witnessed unimaginable horrors during the 100-day genocide in which an estimated 800,000 to one million Rwandans, mainly Tutsis, were slaughtered by militias and Hutus supporting their efforts. Serge alone lost more than 50 members of his own family, including his father and brother.

Sixteen years on, Serge and Patrick are committed to raising awareness about the genocide. They met while working at the Kigali Memorial Centre, the biggest genocide memorial site in Rwanda. Serge, whose relatives are among the 258,000 victims buried at the Centre, has worked as a tour guide there for the past two years. Patrick documented testimonials of survivors. Serge admits the job initially brought back harrowing memories, but he is determined that people do not forget the terrible events of 1994. 'Genocide has its root causes in education. It took a long time to embed

hatred in people's hearts. We have an objective that it will not happen again, and we think we have a duty to raise awareness about the genocide.'

To this end, Noam Schimmel, a media and communications PhD student at LSE, applied for a grant from the LSE Annual Fund to bring the two men over to England. Noam has developed strong links with Rwanda, regularly volunteering with NGOs that support genocide survivors and conducting research on various human rights issues. He met the men during a trip to Rwanda while working as an intern at the UN International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in Tanzania. 'Given my background in this area, I thought applying for a grant from the LSE Annual Fund to bring Patrick and Serge to speak at LSE about their experiences would be a good way to connect students and faculty more personally to Rwandan genocide survivors and their efforts to rebuild their lives and secure their human rights,' he said.

They arrived in England – their first visit to the country – last November. Their visit coincided with an exhibition at LSE by the Survivors Fund (SURF) charity, which focused on the situation in Rwanda today through the stories of four survivors. Held in the Atrium Gallery, and organised by LSE Arts with the Centre for the Study of Human Rights, *Heroes of Our Time: Rwandan Courage and Survival* emphasised the need to ensure voices of survivors are listened to, their needs met, and the collective memory is kept alive.

During their two week stay, Serge and Patrick gave a series of talks to students in the departments of Media and Communications, Social Policy, Social Psychology, International Relations, and International History. They also gave a public lecture, in partnership with LSE's media think tank POLIS, called 'Media and Identity: reporting the Rwandan genocide', together with Lindsey Hilsum, Channel 4 News world editor. Lindsey was living in Rwanda when the genocide began. She described the moment when the plane carrying Juvénal Habyarimana, the Hutu president of Rwanda at the time, was shot down over Kigali airport.

'I heard an enormous explosion, I could see on the horizon a red ball of fire,' she said. The incident, on

Far right: Nyamata Genocide Memorial, Rwanda

Below: Patrick Iregura (left) and Serge Rwigamba at the *Heroes of our Time* exhibition, LSE Atrium Gallery



6 April 1994, provided a catalyst for the genocide. Ethnic tension between the Hutus and Tutsis had intensified under the Belgian colonists, who are widely believed to have used a divide and rule tactic to foment inter-ethnic division and resentment. While it is still uncertain who was behind the president's assassination, the Tutsis were blamed. A campaign of systematic killing was initiated against Tutsis and moderate Hutus, by the Interahamwe, a government trained and sponsored militia.

Serge, now 30, recalls the terrifying day militia, armed with guns and machetes broke into his home. 'They checked my parents identity cards, forced them to their knees and told them they had to be killed because the president had died.' His family managed to escape by giving the soldiers money. They fled their home and sought refuge in a chapel. But after four weeks militia entered the chapel and began massacring the men. 'There were more than 300 Tutsis in the chapel,' he said. 'They came and separated women and children. They started hacking the men with machetes and shooting them. That was the last time I saw my father and my brother.'

Women and children were taken to another church. It was the first time Serge had left the chapel in a month and the horrifying sights which confronted him remain etched in his memory. 'There were bodies in the street, the bodies of neighbours who had stayed in their homes,' he said. 'Women hung on trees, children crying. Dogs eating the flesh of people. It was very frightening.'

Hopes that the church would be a safe haven soon proved to be futile. Armed soldiers periodically entered and carried out spates of killings. 'We had a constant fear that we were going to be killed,' said Serge. 'You could hear girls being raped outside the church, hear their screams, and I feared for my sister.' During one of the killing sprees, a primary school friend was killed in front of him. 'I couldn't move,' said Serge, fearing he was next. 'I took a scarf and covered my face, and pretended I was a girl.' On 4 July 1994 the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a Tutsi-led rebel group, took control of Kigali. Serge and his family left the church only to find their home had been burnt down. 'We struggled to live,' he said. 'My mother got stomach problems caused by sadness.'

While more than a decade has passed since the humanitarian crisis, Rwanda faces ongoing social and economic problems, such as a chronic lack of emotional and medical support for survivors. 'Survivors have so many emotions they don't know how to deal with,' says Patrick. 'In Rwanda there's a shortage of trained counsellors to help people suffering from trauma. Survivors are trying to help other survivors, but are not equipped to do this.'

During the genocide, rape was commonly used as a weapon against victims. As a result, Rwanda has suffered from a huge rise in HIV infections. Figures from SURF suggest more than 67 per cent of women who were raped at that time were infected with HIV and AIDS. In addition, tens of thousands of people are still without shelter after their homes were destroyed during the genocide. For the country to move forward, says Patrick, these problems need to be addressed. 'It's hard to talk of reconciliation while survivors are still suffering.'

For survivors like Patrick and Serge, one of the main obstacles to reconciliation is the fact that perpetrators



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often receive minimal sentences. The local courts, or Gacaca courts, try criminals within the communities where the crimes were committed. Those who confess are 'forgiven' and have their sentences reduced. But reprisal attacks on witnesses are commonplace.

Patrick has called for the international community to intervene and help establish a new court, to correct the loopholes in Gacaca systems and malfunctions at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. 'We need to come up with a new form of justice. The current

situation does not help survivors.' In the meantime Serge and Patrick continue to raise awareness and keep the memory of the genocide alive.

'It's a relief to be able to share,' says Serge. 'It helps because you know people can learn from it, and it makes a difference.'

Former LSE press officer Claire Burke interviewed Serge Rwigamba and Patrick Iregura in December 2009



African Initiative

In January of this year LSE announced a new academic partnership with the

University of Cape Town. UCT will become the first African institutional partner for LSE and will provide the foundation for LSE to develop and deliver research and institutional capacity building initiatives with institutions across Africa. This is an integral part of the School's 'African Initiative', which has already led to the appointment of Professor Thandika Mkandawire (pictured), formerly director of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, as the first holder of LSE's new chair in African Development in October 2009.

Taking as its theme Africa and the World, the LSE African Initiative will encompass a dual-centred summer school and PhD workshops in

Francophone and Anglophone locations, scholarships, visiting fellowships for African academics at LSE, a multi-layered research programme and a series of events at LSE and in Africa. LSE's alumni and friends have already generously supported new scholarships for African students, a cohort of visiting research fellowships for 2010-11, and, through the LSE Annual Fund, the first year of Professor Mkandawire's appointment. In addition, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation has supported LSE Global Governance and the Methodology Institute to develop research and connections with African academics and policy makers on governance issues.

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