

From the G.C. President

November 20, 1995

Robert S. Folkenberg

O DATELINE RWANDA: On landing in the small central African nation of Rwanda, one is impressed by its cool climate (Kigali, the capital, is 5,000 feet--1,500 meters--above sea level), soaring volcanoes, intense cultivation, and greenery. The pristine beauty of this small nation (27,000 sq Km--about the size of the State of Maryland) contradicts the images of genocide, warfare and a million refugees that dominated the news in mid-1994. On the surface one sees little evidence of the raging days of April-June, 1994, during which between 500,000 and 1 million Tutsis (and the "moderate" Hutus that tried to protect them) were slaughtered--including thousands of SDA members and about 30 pastors. Victims' bodies clogged and then infected the rivers and lakes. The effect of the tragedy to the national psyche is so immense that it is impossible to estimate. The demonic excesses of the perpetrators could not but make people wonder about their own characters and identities. The tragedy was compounded by the fact that 95 percent of the population claim to be Christians (285,000 are SDAs).

The stories of inhuman cruelty, heroism, and tragedy abound. Let me share just one. Pastor Amon Rugelinyange, elected last week as president of the Rwanda Union Mission, and his family lived in Gitwe, site of the first mission station in French speaking Central Africa, where he served as president of the Central Rwanda Mission. On Friday, April 22, he left to visit some remote churches in his field. The next day the militias began killing people in Gitwe and the village to which he had gone. Though he tried desperately, due to the roadblocks he was not able to return to his family. He stayed in the home of a Hutu church elder who would have paid with his life if the pastor had been found. When he heard the mob was coming the elder moved the pastor and successfully hid him from the marauding militias.

Meanwhile, a large number of Tutsis came to our Gitwe campus seeking refuge, as they had done many times in the past when uprisings were threatened. On Friday May 20, Gitwe was attacked. The local militia had been unwilling, up to that point, to kill pastors and their families. So the Burgermeister (mayor) sought those outside the village who were willing to do the killing. On the 20th the mayor and the other soldiers came to our campus, found the Mission Church Ministries director and killed him on the spot. They took 68 Adventists from the campus, including Mrs. Rugelinyange, three of his eight children, and nine grandchildren, to a place about 5 kilometers (3 miles) away and killed them all. When I asked him how he could handle that level of pain and grief, he simply said, Romans 8:28 is now my favorite verse ("And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose"). This soft spoken man of God is truly an example of Christian grace.

On Thursday I visited with Prime Minister, Pierre Célestin Rwigema and next we drove to our university campus (now closed) in Mudende where I met with about 3,000 believers. In the afternoon we visited the Catholic Church in Ntarama where about 5,000 of those who sought refuge there were slaughtered on April 15, 1994. The remains of hundreds of the victims still lie on the sanctuary floor where they were killed, a graphic reminder of the excesses of which mankind is capable. On returning to Kigali I had a productive visit with Vice President of Rwanda, Paul Kagame.

Sabbath was an exciting day. Over 20,000 came to the national stadium to worship, including the Vice President/Minister of Defense of the nation. During my message, broadcast live to the nation, I had an opportunity to confess to the failures of nominal Christianity and appeal to the clergy of the nation to call for living the life of Christ rather than just claiming the name and forms of Christianity. I called for submission to the transforming power of the gospel, as manifested in the new birth experience, rather than superficial adherence to the rites and rituals of Christianity.

On Sabbath afternoon we drove to a community near Gitwe where over 40,000 came (some walking more than 20 kilometers--12 miles) to worship--all day! For the morning service they connected a radio to the public address system and listened to the service broadcast from Kigali. What an inspiring day this was!

On Sunday morning I continue this itinerary into Zaire about which I shall report in next week's edition.

O GLOBAL MISSION - BUDDHISM: November 11 marked an unprecedented exchange between the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the most distinguished Buddhist university in Bangkok, Thailand. On this Sabbath, for the first time, six Adventist scholars and 50 Thai Adventist members met with university administrators and 50 Monks to exchange information on worship practices and values.

Adventist scholars presented information and pictures about Christian symbols and practices such as baptism, communion, and church buildings. Adventists presented talks and demonstrated songs, stewardship, prayer, and the Sabbath School Bible study. Using Ellen White descriptions Jon Dybdahl simulated the Apostle Paul before the Areopagus Council when he emphasized that all were God's children and all were called to live in harmony with God's love as demonstrated by Christ. Cliff Mayberly presented the Sabbath.

The Bible foretells a time when Christians will stand before councils presenting a reason for their faith. The truths of the Bible and hope in Christ will go to every nation, kindred, language, and people.