

THE LIBERATION STRUGGLE OF RWANDA

The liberation of Rwanda was the result of the courage and sacrifice of Rwanda's sons and daughters. The liberation war was a consequence of the bad governance and poor leadership that had characterized Rwanda for many years. This governance was marked by killings, exclusion, and discrimination against Rwandans.

The struggle to liberate the country began on October 1, 1990. The war continued until August 4, 1993, when a ceasefire was reached through the Arusha Peace Accords. However, the situation continued to deteriorate, eventually leading to the implementation of the Genocide against the Tutsi. The Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) resumed its military campaign, stopped the genocide, and the self-proclaimed Interim Government fled the country.

At 2:00 a.m. on October 1, 1990, RPF-Inkotanyi forces led by Major General Fred Gisa Rwigema crossed the Rwanda–Uganda border, marking the beginning of the liberation struggle. At that time, the leaders of both countries were attending the United Nations General Assembly.

On October 7, 1990, the forces of President Juvénal Habyarimana's government launched operations to repel the RPF. The government later resorted to deceptive tactics, including shelling certain areas to create fear among the population and gain public support for the war effort. Many Tutsi were arrested and accused of being RPF collaborators (IBYITSO); some were killed, while others were forced to flee their homes.

In the days that followed, the RPF/RPA continued its military operations. The Gabiro Military Academy was captured, and RPF forces advanced to within approximately 60 kilometers of Kigali.

Meanwhile, France misled the international community by claiming that it had deployed troops to protect its citizens in Rwanda. In reality, it established military positions aimed at weakening the RPF through what became known as Operation *Norôît*.

The situation became difficult for the RPF after several senior commanders were killed in combat. Major Paul Kagame interrupted his military studies in the United States and returned to join the struggle.

Paul Kagame regrouped the forces and led them toward the forests of the Virunga region. Under extremely harsh conditions, the troops spent two months reorganizing and rebuilding their strength. The RPF recruited new fighters from various locations and strengthened its political structures. Alexis Kanyarengwe was appointed Chairman of the RPF.

The movement continued to gain support as people voluntarily contributed resources to sustain the struggle. The size of the army also increased significantly: from about 5,000 troops in 1991, to 12,000 in 1992, and approximately 25,000 by 1994.

In January 1991, government forces (FAR) were caught off guard by the strength of the RPF. On January 23, 1991, the town of Ruhengeri was attacked and remained under RPF control for an entire day.

Negotiations between the two sides continued but produced limited results. On July 12, 1992, a ceasefire agreement was signed. On September 31, 1992, political peace negotiations officially began.

Meanwhile, violence against civilians continued throughout the country. On February 8, 1993, the RPF decided it could no longer tolerate the massacres and resumed military operations. Ruhengeri was captured once again, causing widespread alarm within the government.

At that time, RPF forces had advanced to within about 30 kilometers of Kigali but later agreed to withdraw. France again provided military assistance to the Habyarimana government, including ammunition and weapons. By then, Rwanda was estimated to have more than 1.5 million internally displaced people.

In the following months, the Arusha Peace Process made significant progress. RPF politicians moved to Kigali together with a contingent of 600 soldiers.

On April 6, 1994, the aircraft carrying President Juvénal Habyarimana was shot down.

The Genocide against the Tutsi, which had been planned and prepared, was then put into action. More than one million Tutsi were murdered. The government also killed political opponents and anyone perceived as an obstacle to the genocidal plan.

On April 7, 1994, the killings spread across the country. The RPF-Inkotanyi resolved to stop the genocide.

The contingent of 600 RPF soldiers stationed at the CND building in Kigali, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Charles Kayonga, defended themselves against major attacks launched by government forces from Camp GP and Camp Kanombe.

The RPF assumed the responsibility of stopping the genocide and organized its military campaign along three major fronts.

One force, the Charlie Mobile Force under Colonel Gashumba, advanced toward western Ruhengeri.

Another force consisted of the 7th Battalion under Colonel Eugene Bagire and the 157th Battalion under Lieutenant Colonel Fred Ibingira, which advanced toward eastern Rwanda, particularly Kibungo.

The Alpha Mobile Force was commanded by Colonel Sam Kaka and operated alongside Battalion 56 under Colonel Charles Ngoga, Battalion 21 under Colonel Musitu, Battalion 101

under Colonel Charles Muhire, and the Bravo Mobile Force under Colonel Ludoviko Twahirwa (Dodo).

On April 12, 1994, the Interim Government fled Kigali and relocated to Gitarama.

In eastern Rwanda, the Rusumo border post was captured on April 22, 1994. On May 5, 1994, Kigali International Airport was effectively shut down due to shelling. On May 16, 1994, the Kigali–Gitarama road was cut off. Six days later, the airport itself was captured.

By that time, the RPF controlled much of northern and eastern Rwanda. Government forces (FAR) were under immense pressure and were clearly losing the war.

On June 13, 1994, the RPF captured Gitarama, forcing FAR troops to retreat toward the Burundi border. Around the same period, the French-led Operation Turquoise began. By then, the government had little capacity left to prevent the fall of Kigali, Ruhengeri, and Gisenyi.

On July 4, 1994, Kigali was captured, marking the RPF's victory in the liberation struggle.

Gisenyi was captured on July 8, 1994, followed by Ruhengeri on July 13, 1994. On August 21, 1994, the French-controlled Turquoise Zone came to an end, and the entire country came under the control of the new government.

True liberation is more than a military victory. It is the responsibility to honor those who sacrificed everything so that Rwanda could live. Their legacy challenges every generation of Rwandans to serve their country with integrity, safeguard national unity, preserve peace, and continue building a prosperous future for all Rwandans.

The story of liberation is not merely a chapter in our history. It is a reminder of what courage, conviction, and love of country can achieve.