

small world, big problems

At Issue: In 1994, more than 800,000 Rwandans were slaughtered during 100 days of genocide. Meanwhile, neighbouring Uganda was in the middle of “the world’s most neglected humanitarian crisis,” as labeled by a top UN official. Two years later, a government in Central Asia would begin a reign of widespread, unchecked human rights abuses against its own population. And later still, a conflict in North Africa continues to go unchecked, even as the death toll mounts. **The common thread throughout:** The world watched while the tragedies unfolded. In a five-part series starting today, *24 hours* examines the events through the eyes of Vancouverites who were directly affected, or who tried to affect change. **And we ask:** What should we as Canadians be doing? **Today:** Rwanda.



Bridges can be built on past lessons

Irwin Loy, 24 hours

Stories by Irwin Loy



at a glance

- Capital: Kigali
- Pop.: 8,648,248 (2006)
- Languages: Kinyarwanda, Bantu languages, French, English, Kiswahili

learn more

ON THE WEB:

- Building Bridges with Rwanda: www.bbrwanda.org
- Rwanda Gateway: www.rwandagateway.org

ON THE SHELF:

- *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda.*
- Philip Gourevitch

ON THE SCREEN:

- *Shake Hands with the Devil* (Documentary. There is also a fictional film using the same title)

Lama Mugabo was barely older than a toddler at the time, but he still remembers what it was like to become a refugee.

“Chaos,” Mugabo recalls. “People running. Being in a refugee concentration camp. Everybody’s afraid and completely uprooted. And then fleeing all night.”

That was 1959, what many call Rwanda’s “first genocide.”

Thirty-five years later, Mugabo was no longer a refugee. Instead, he was a student, cramming for spring exams, when he saw the horrific images coming from his native country on T.V.

Genocide. In only 100 days, the majority Hutu population slaughtered an estimated 800,000, or more, people: Ethnic Tutsis, or other moderate Hutus.

“I felt really disappointed in Canada,” Mugabo says, in retrospect. “Rwanda was not a remote country that we do not have a relationship with. We have a long history and tradition – Canada was the first country to build a university in Rwanda. But Canada did not act.”

In the elegant west side office where Mugabo now works as a community development planner, the conversation switches topics

You get the feeling there are other things he would rather talk about. Like how a former child refugee ended up as a highly educated community planner in Canada.

That story, as Mugabo tells it, was one of luck. In 1975, he was awarded a scholarship to study at Pearson College in Victoria, a program that brings together students from all over the world. Mugabo can’t say enough about it.

“When you’re a teenager, you’re dynamic. You’re curious, you want to go and change the world,” he says. “By having all these international kids together for two years and giving them an opportunity to learn from each other, then their horizons open and they can go and do some good

things. And that’s what I’ve been trying to do since then.”

Since immigrating to Canada for good as a refugee in the early 1980s, Mugabo became a Canadian citizen. He spent years working in the non-government sector. And he completed a Master’s degree at UBC’s school of planning.

One day, Mugabo found himself looking for a course on African issues, taught by an African. He wanted to write a thesis investigating international development in Rwanda, yet he couldn’t find a professor who knew enough to help.

He met with UBC officials but was disheartened when he was told Africa “isn’t a priority.” He started a petition asking the school to teach African courses. More than 3,400 people signed. But when Mugabo went to submit the petition, he was greeted by police officers.

“These bastards brought in the police!” he says, laughing. “These guys thought we were going to riot or something.”

The students did manage to have a productive conversation with a senior administrator, the result of which, Mugabo says, was the introduction of a few African studies courses. Mugabo laughs at the school’s overreaction now. But the truth is, many Canadians knew little about Rwanda during the genocide. And it’s arguable that today, 13 years later, that knowledge hasn’t stretched past the single event.

“[Canadian Lt.-Gen. and head of the failed UN mission in Rwanda, Roméo Dallaire complained strongly that most international reporters that were sent to Rwanda to interview him had no clue about the issues,” Mugabo says. “It reflects on our

education system. Think about when you’re in high school. Think about when you’re in college. How much do you learn about African politics and African issues?”

“I think we need to start in the elementary schools and build an understanding and knowledge of Africa. Not as a place of problems only. But a place with a rich history and a valuable culture.”

Developing countries have a lot to learn from Canada, but the reverse is also true, Mugabo argues.

“We look at Africa as a problem that we need to fix – corruption, AIDS, things that don’t work,” Mugabo says. “We need to begin to engage Africa in a way that we can share knowledge, because they certainly have strengths we can learn from.”

“When you look around, how many of us know our neighbours? How many of us really understand issues of First Nations or people in the Downtown Eastside? Here we are, one of the best cities in the world, yet we have in the core of our city, the poorest postal code of our country. How do you explain that?”

These days, Mugabo is concentrating his efforts on the NGO he founded, Building Bridges with Rwanda. Its aim is to connect professionals in Canada with their counterparts in Rwanda.

He’s also balancing his perspectives as a Rwandan expat, and as a Canadian citizen.

“I like to describe this as sitting between two stools. One foot is in Rwanda. Another one is in Canada,” he says, smiling. “This is the beauty of Canadian multiculturalism. That you can jump into the salad bowl and remain a tomato.”



Mugabo



Rwanda
24hrs podcast
com

Tomorrow: How a 14-year-old high school student from West Van got herself blacklisted by the Taliban; and, why it took an act of terrorism to get people thinking about Afghanistan.