



Lauren Weber traveled to Rwanda to see whether a nation can recover from genocide.

RWANDA'S HARD RECOVERY

BY LAUREN WEBER '94

In Rwanda, mountains stretch toward the horizon in every direction. This undulating landscape gave rise to one of the country's early monikers, when colonial travelers labeled it “the land of a thousand hills.” The hillsides are lush and green, mostly planted in neat terraces that descend like stairs to frothy rivers. When I visited Rwanda in January, the rivers all ran brown, tinted by the eroded topsoil that had cascaded down the mountains during the rainy season.

The flattest land I saw in all of Rwanda was a soccer field about 20 miles outside Kigali, the capital. From the car where I sat and watched this achingly beautiful country speed past, I spotted a row of boys walking across the clearing, swinging machetes over their shoulders and then down across the grass. They were mowing the field, prepping it for another game.

I was startled to see those machetes, until I realized over the course of my visit to Rwanda that these knives are an inescapable fact of life there. Their sharp blades are efficient at clearing fields for planting, cutting paths through dense jungles, harvesting bananas and sugarcane, and slaughtering goats for their meat and skins. But they are also, as the world now knows, frighteningly efficient at killing enemies, friends, neighbors, and co-workers. The machete was the primary weapon deployed in Rwanda's 1994 genocide and civil war, in which as many as one million people were murdered. In the months before the genocide began, allies of the Rwandan government imported half a million machetes from China. When militias led by extremist Hutus—the majority ethnic group in Rwanda—put out a call to murder minority Tutsis and moderate Hutus, hundreds of thousands answered, picking up machetes and guns to accomplish their diabolical task.

Today Rwanda is, at least on the surface, tranquil and safe. The administration of President Paul Kagame is widely respected and credited with establishing an atmosphere of hope, ambition, decent governance, and deep moral purpose. Roads are filled with people going about their daily business: women with baskets of laundry or bananas perched on their heads, children kicking balls down the side of a highway, men riding bikes piled high with sugarcane.

I went to Rwanda for two weeks in January with a group of 13 MBA students from Columbia University's Graduate

Rwandan women use machetes to cut grass. The genocide memorial in Ntarama, where 5,000 people died inside a church.



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School of Business, where I was enrolled for the last academic year on a business-journalism fellowship. The trip focused on economic development and public health efforts, and we visited a number of impressive projects around the country.

Everywhere we went, we heard the same refrain: This is a new country. Rwanda has been reborn. As a nation, we are only 12 years old.

In this light, Rwanda's progress—evident in the sprinkling of Internet cafés and the newly paved roads—is striking. But the country is still in many respects haunted by the brutal civil war and struggling to achieve a catharsis of reconciliation and forgiveness. Reminders of the genocide abound in the everyday speech of the people, who divide time itself by the event. Sentences start with the phrases “Before the genocide...” or “Ever since the genocide...” when Rwandans explain just about any aspect of their culture, from the economy to family life. And the physical reminders are everywhere, in the bodies of the living—we saw a man with a hole in his forehead where a bullet had penetrated it—and the roadside memorials marking the mass graves in village after village.

At one such memorial, a former church in the village of Ntarama, I met Narcisse Mupagasi, a shy, slight 30-year-old man. He works as a guide at the memorial, waiting for the five or ten visitors who come each day to see where 5,000 people died. Narcisse was one of only ten survivors there; after the militias swept through the church with grenades and machetes, he lay buried under dead bodies and eventually pushed his way out. A

Rwandan public health worker told me, “After the genocide, there was nowhere to pray because all the churches were full of dead bodies.”

I had wanted to visit Rwanda since 1994, when I read the first newspaper accounts of the genocide. I remember sitting on the floor of my studio apartment in Seattle, cutting out the articles and putting them in a manila folder I labeled “genocide.” I went to Rwanda to try to understand death, and human cruelty, and how people's consciences can become so anesthetized that they will commit acts of unspeakable brutality, not just against people who are nameless and faceless to them, but against their own neighbors and kin.

But even when you're up close to the remnants of these acts, there are pieces that remain elusive, incomprehensible. I visited a barracks where hundreds of skeletons lie preserved in lime; the arms and hands of many are frozen near their faces, where they tried to block the machete blows. Yet I often felt that the longer I stared at the bones, the less I understood.

Just outside the Ntarama church, two men in pink prison jumpsuits sat under a tree, taking a rest from working in the fields. These were *genocidaires*: men who participated in the killings of 1994. As part of their punishment, they do community service in their towns and villages. These two may have murdered people right at this very church. As they sat under the tree, children played nearby and men and women walked down the road on their way to work or home. As far as I could tell, no one paid the *genocidaires* any mind. There it was—the strange, resigned, ordinary, uneasy co-existence that defines post-genocide Rwanda.

At the church, I apologized to Narcisse in my halting French for asking what I knew was an impolitic question. “Are you Hutu or Tutsi?” Narcisse smiled shyly and looked embarrassed. He shook his head. “No Hutu, no Tutsi. Rwandan. We are all Rwandan now.”

Such is the state of reconciliation in Rwanda now. One's ethnic affiliation no longer appears on Rwandan identity cards. At the genocide museum in Kigali, the main exhibit begins with these words: “We are one people. We speak one language. We have one history.”

This is, I think, both a deliberate strategy meant to push the country toward reconciliation and also an inescapable necessity. Rwanda is dirt-poor and tiny, smaller than the state of Maryland. With nine million people in 10,000 square miles, it is the most densely populated country in Africa, and nearly every inch of it is cultivated. There are people everywhere. Just when you think you may be alone

on an isolated stretch of road, a man on a bike rounds the corner from one direction and a gaggle of schoolchildren tumbles into view from the other direction.

After the genocide, nearly a million Hutus fled to make-shift camps in surrounding countries, fearing reprisals. But most stayed, and so did the Tutsi survivors. Where could they have gone? Most Rwandans live on less than \$140 a year. There was no land available to settle elsewhere in the country. No other nations welcomed them. So, unlike Holocaust survivors a half-century before, they came out of hiding, came out of the mountains, and returned home.

So now in Rwanda, Tutsis and Hutus, victims and perpetrators, live side by side, as they did before, because they have no other choice.

I wondered many times, How can people co-exist after such a cataclysmic event? I kept coming back to something I'd read recently, about a poet who said he could sum up everything he'd learned about life in three words: "It goes on."

We spent an evening talking to Sam Gasana, a professional translator who was born in Uganda to Rwandan parents. Sam lived in Uganda during the genocide, and returned to Rwanda soon after, like many former exiles. He translates mostly for United Nations workers, journalists and academics who come to Rwanda to observe the genocide trials known as *gacacas*.

Gacacas are Rwanda's attempt to mete out some element of justice to the killers, as well as to help victims learn the details of their loved ones' deaths and, if possible, achieve some resolution to their ordeals. While ringleaders of the genocide are still being tried at the Arusha courts in

Tanzania, the country needed a way to prosecute the tens of thousands of suspects arrested for participating in the murder, rape, and looting. Most of them languished in overcrowded prisons until 2002, when Rwandan officials decided to turn the *gacaca* process—a traditional village forum for resolving conflicts—into genocide courts.

At the *gacacas*, *genocidaires* are brought before a panel of nine judges and an audience of local residents. They are usually held in open air, and villagers sit on benches or on the grass. As we drove through the countryside, we

passed dozens of them in progress.

Sam explained the process to us. Police officers lead the prisoners, all wearing pink jumpsuits, to the tribunal in groups of seven. The trials can quickly become graphic and emotional. "If a prisoner says he killed three people, a judge asks, 'How did you kill them?'" Sam said. "And the prisoner may answer, 'I cut him with my machete,' or 'I burned him in his house.' And the judge says, 'What did you do with the bodies?'" and the prisoner may say, 'I threw them in the river.' Often, the family members are there. The father or mother, the child of the person who was



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Still, the genocide has left a legacy of mistrust between former friends and neighbors that may take generations to dispel. In Mayange, a hamlet about two hours from Kigali, farmers are reluctant to work together to improve their crop productivity, according to Josh Ruxin. Ruxin heads the Millennium Village project in Mayange, a public health and economic development effort operating under the auspices of Columbia economist Jeffrey Sachs's Earth Institute. Ruxin says some of the worst effects of the genocide are these subtle shifts in social relations: the reluctance among Rwandans now to share resources and knowledge, and a general suspicion of each others' intentions or interests.

This mistrust has long-term and potentially lethal consequences. As much as Rwanda needs to mend its social fabric, it also must, if there is any hope of building a strong civil society and heading off a future civil war, develop a dynamic and robust economy. Indeed, the genocide was preceded by a slump in world prices for Rwanda's chief exports, coffee and tea. In his book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, Jared Diamond also argues that the slaughter was stoked by the dearth of available property. Many Hutus were told by the genocide's provocateurs, "If you kill your neighbor, you can take his house, his cattle, and his land."

But there's no obvious path to growth. Some of the world's most brilliant economists and social scientists have applied themselves over the last 50-odd years to solving the problem of persistent poverty, with few sustained successes. The list of ingredients required to create the alchemy of economic development is long; countries need everything from reliable electric-

ity and transportation links to good governance to access to ports to export industries to decent education and public health systems. Rwanda lacks most of these; power outages are common, its largest airport has almost no cargo capacity and schoolteachers themselves are woefully undereducated. (It may be a blessing or a curse, but Rwanda

Photo: Weber visits the border between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

also lacks the natural resources, such as oil, diamonds, and minerals, that many other African countries possess.)

And Rwanda's resources and capacity—particularly human capacity, in the form of skilled professionals and an educated workforce—seem frustratingly inadequate to meet many of the country's basic needs and its long-term aims. In 2000, Kagame's government laid out a series of ambitious goals in a document called Vision 2020. He has received strong support for the plans from parliament, along with international donors and many citizens; the commercial streets in towns and villages are lined with shops with names such as Coiffure 2020 and Supermarket 2020.

The primary goal is to raise Rwanda to the status of a middle-income country with a GDP of \$900 per capita, up from \$290 per capita in 2000 (the United States has a GDP of \$43,500 per capita). Kagame also wants to reduce the poverty rate to 30 percent from the current 64 percent and solve chronic poverty-related illnesses such as malnutrition and malaria. All of the goals hinge on stimulating foreign investment and developing a homegrown private sector economy.

How does a tiny, landlocked, resource-deprived nation accomplish such ambitious goals? Kagame and his government envision a knowledge- and tourism-based economy, with wireless Internet access linking Rwandans internally and to the rest of the world, technology companies writing software code and providing labor and services to multinational corporations, and a robust stream of affluent tourists coming to visit the country's spectacular rainforests, wildlife sanctuaries and—its greatest tourist draw—some of the world's last remaining mountain gorillas.

It's not clear if Kagame's ambitions have a hope of coming to fruition. The challenges run deep down, to broad cultural and social traits, and they touch on some of the most troubling and intractable issues in the field of economic development. Why do some countries escape poverty while others remain mired in it? How do you create cultural norms that support and foster innovation, investment, and economic growth?

If I had the answers to these questions, I would be running the World Bank. But I did have a lot of time to think about them and debate them with my fellow travelers dur-

ing our many long jeep rides and our frequent waits in hotel lobbies and airport terminals. Indeed, traveling with a cohort of MBA students gave me a new and valuable perspective on these issues. Their backgrounds ranged from consulting to microfinance to investment banking to real estate, and they analyzed Rwanda's challenges with the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) methodology they've internalized during their year or two in business school. Day after day they pointed out inadequate services with the simple refrain, "missed market opportunity."

For instance, a staple of any tourist economy is postcards. But in Rwanda, I saw them in only three places: in the gift shops at two high-end hotels and at the main tourist office in Kigali, where we picked up our gorilla-tracking permits. Not even the National Museum in the city of Butare stocked postcards. We also were told by expatriate aid workers that "there's nothing to buy in Rwanda." We didn't believe it at first; most of us had traveled in developing countries and expected to be bombarded by oppor-

tunities to buy crafts, jewelry, T-shirts, and other tourist kitsch. But that didn't happen in Rwanda. There we were, eager to spend thousands of dollars among us, and nowhere to spend it. I ended up buying my niece a T-shirt in Nairobi, when I'd have preferred to spend that money in Rwanda, a country so desperate for foreign currency.

One of the most revealing visits of our trip was to the Kigali Institute for Science and Technology, a four-year college in the capital city.

KIST's mission is in part to replenish the nation's pool of skilled engineers, scientists, and technicians. (A generation of professionals was murdered in the genocide.) But soon after the school's founding in 1997, KIST officials ran into a major problem: about 60 percent of its graduates were unable to find jobs because of the dismal state of Rwanda's private sector. There simply weren't enough companies, local or foreign, operating in the country to absorb newly-trained workers.

The solution KIST's leaders devised? With assistance from the Indian government, they started a business in-

cubation facility designed to teach entrepreneurship skills to KIST students and members of the public. The goal is not simply to help a few businesses get off the ground, but a much larger one: to begin the dogged work of creating a culture of competition, creativity, and innovation where one had never existed before.

The challenge was summed up by Edouard Ndayisaba, co-founder of a small biogas firm and a client of the business incubator. "Before the genocide there was no entrepreneurship in Rwanda. None. Now it's government policy: 'You people create your own jobs. Then you can develop our country.'"

Even during our visit with KIST, so focused on Rwanda's future, the specter of the genocide loomed close by. Six KIST students, most in their early 20s, joined us to discuss their studies and career ambitions. One of my colleagues, trying to assess what resources were available to the students, asked whether their parents had any related professional experience. The room went quiet for a moment and then the profes-

sor who oversees the incubator, Rajeev Aggarwal, said, "Most of them don't have parents." It was one of those punch-in-the-gut moments, when you come face-to-face with a reality that, for a short time, had

started once again to fade into abstraction.

"This is a country of dreamers," Josh Ruxin had said as we rolled through the lush hillsides on a United Nations bus toward Mayange on our second day in Rwanda. That thought stayed with me for the rest of the trip and was echoed throughout the visit by other development professionals as well as ordinary people. Many of the Rwandans we met, particularly professionals and government officials, were energetic, passionate, and infused with a sense of moral purpose.

Indeed, I heard a great deal of optimism and ambition in my two weeks in Rwanda, but it was difficult not to wonder: How many of these goals are achievable?

I posed this question to one experienced development professional. He considered it for a moment and said, "In other countries I've been, people don't follow through. Follow-through is always the problem. But here, people have a vision of what has to be done and they keep on striving." Perhaps that sense of mission will drive Rwanda forward. I hope so. I know I'll be watching.