

REPORT OF THE BELGIUM-RWANDA RECONCILIATION CONFERENCE KIGALI-GITARAMA 7-14 JULY 2009

In the framework of the "**Europe-Africa Reconciliation Process**" (EARP) we went to Africa again with a Belgian delegation. After Congo twice (June 2006 and June 2008) it was time for another former colony, Rwanda. The purpose was for representatives of the European nations who had participated in the colonisation of Africa, to confess to their former colonies their historical debt of all injustice, oppression and cruelties that took place in that period. It is almost impossible to convey the intense experience of a trip to Africa and a reconciliation conference to those who were not present, but we would like to make a humble attempt in this report.

Let's start at the beginning. Already during the preparation of the journey it struck me how little Belgians (me included!) know of the colonial history: on the cruelties in Congo there have been some more publications in recent years but the Belgian part in Rwanda and the relationship with the genocide in 1994 is hardly known. That is why Philip (member of the delegation) has written a decent historical study¹ to inform and sharpen the Belgian consciences.

The Belgian **delegation** that joined this time was Ignace Demaerel (Schaarbeek), Philip Quarles van Ufford (Ronse) and Robert Lippens (Oostrozebeke); the fourth member (Rik Waelkens, Oudenaarde) missed his flight due to traffic. There were delegates from other countries that directly or indirectly influenced Rwanda in the past: 3 from France, 5 from Germany, 1 from the Netherlands, 2 from Britain, 3 from the US. Lynn Badcock from "African Enterprise" (Sint-Genesius-Rode) coordinated the European group.



The local Rwandese committee that had prepared the conference consisted of several national leaders of at least 12 denominations led by the Anglican bishop. The conference was called "Rwanda Amateka Mashya" ("Rwanda new beginning" or "new era"), and had been prepared for three years. At this conference also groups of pastors from Burundi, East Congo and Uganda were present because these neighbouring countries were or are involved in the conflict: this is called "the Great Lakes Region".



The first morning we visited the **Genocide Memorial in Kigali**, where the history of the 1994 genocide is being told, with thousands of photos, video testimonies and human remains. Western countries often refer to the genocide as an internal African problem, but they hardly know the history of the colonial period nor the involvement of (mainly) Germany, Belgium and France. It were in fact the Belgian authorities and Church who in the twenties presented the theory that the Tutsi's were a superior race and used them to dominate and oppress the Hutu's. Around 1932 the separation of both groups was completely fixed by stamping the identity cards! In

¹ This study consists of three articles, but for people with a little time there is a summary available; these four texts you will find on www.pray4belgium.be (under the heading "reconciliation"). You will also find some historical studies on Congo and the confession letter we read in Kinshasa last year.

the fifties the government and Church turned completely and started to support the Hutu's in their fight against the Tutsi's. After the independence in 1962 Belgium (and most other countries) continued to support the Hutu regime even though it was evident that regularly mass murders of Tutsi's took place (already 700.000 died between 1959 and 1994). And in 1994, when the signs were more than clear that an organised genocide would take place, the UN troops did nothing and even withdrew: the whole world watched TV and saw the cruel massacres and abandoned Rwanda. There were 800.000 to 1.000.000 dead, 300.000 orphans, 4.000.000 refugees and a completely dislocated country. Literally everything had to be rebuilt, not in the least mutual trust. The government has rebuilt a lot in 15 years and Rwanda continues to grow economically (you notice that immediately in the streets when you compare e.g. with Congo). But the pain is still there: almost every family mourns dead or has a member in prison or still fleeing, or hides secrets on collaborators. There is still a lot of bitterness, fear and distrust, also within families. After our visit to the Genocide Memorial we put flowers on the mass grave (250.000 bodies) – a large article on our visit was printed in the paper with pictures. Then we left for Gitarama for the conference. We stayed in the catholic centre Kabgayi, one of the centres of the genocide.



The conference took place in the Pentecostal church of Gitarama (next to the building was a mass grave of 500 people killed in the church) and lasted three days: there were approximately 200 pastors present. The first two days there were many testimonies and speeches on the history of the genocide, on reconciliation and forgiveness. It was explained how in the history of Rwanda one wound followed another, fed by misunderstanding and ignorance. A crucial person in the whole reconciliation process is dr. Rhiannon Lloyd, a Christian psychiatrist



from

Wales, who went to Rwanda in September 1994 to work on reconciliation, forgiveness and dealing with trauma. She started seminars in churches, taught on forgiveness and reconciliation and can tell thousands of stories on how God worked, melted hard hearts and how Tutsi's and Hutu's, after years of hatred, cried and asked each other for forgiveness. Often a Hutu and a Tutsi would then go together to other churches to bring the same message. At the conference Dr. Rhiannon presented a very penetrating study (the best I have ever heard on this subject!) on forgiveness, what it is and isn't, the price of forgiveness,

what it cost God, Jesus' sacrifice and the deliverance this brings. E.g. we heard the testimony of Joseph, a Tutsi, born in Uganda because his mother gave birth when she was fleeing in a field; after years of misery in refugee camps he returned to Rwanda and became a pastor in a church, yet still he had a heart full of bitterness. During one of the seminars his heart broke and he forgave the Hutu's and later even adopted a Hutu girl. Olivier, a Hutu doctor, told how he had to flee to East Congo at the age of twelve, there he lost his whole family and stayed by himself in the jungle; only after many years could he forgive the Tutsi's and find healing for his inner bitterness. Sylvester, a Hutu, told how his father was falsely accused after the genocide and was jailed innocently for seven years which caused enormous bitterness and hatred. Another Tutsi told at breakfast how his both parents, 7 of his 10 brothers and sisters, his wife and three children were murdered..., but he added whilst looking me straight in the eyes: "I

am healed” and in his eyes I could see that it was true.

Another special guest was the granddaughter of the (in 1959 expelled) king, who survived the genocide in a miraculous way and now lives in the Netherlands. Of course there also was a lot of beautiful music sung by several choirs. Dave, a Brit, had brought together a choir in cooperation with young people from different countries and had composed special songs on the theme of reconciliation (and made some CD's). The American delegates told how they had made contact in the US with dignitaries such as Roméo Dallaire, the former UN-general in Rwanda, and the presidents Clinton and Carter – Clinton later publicly admitted they had made big mistakes. The delegates from the neighbouring countries also told their story since the many refugees destabilised the situation and militias that had fled terrorised the area (and some still do). During the meals there was plenty of opportunity to meet each other and there were many interesting and rewarding conversations.



What makes this story more painful for Christians is that the **churches** partly active or passive cooperated with the genocide. In 1993 90% of Rwanda was Christian and it was a model state! How deep was that Christianity? Which Christianity had the white people taught or shown²? The catholic arch bishop during the genocide was a good friend of the Hutu president and supported his criminal policy against the Tutsi's. The worst story is that of a catholic priest who gave the order to militia to bulldoze his own church (!) with 2000 of his members. Other priests and nuns refused to protect refugees. But also in the protestant churches some of the pastors cooperated actively or passively. Happily there are also testimonies of supernatural courage of church leaders and Christians who gave their lives to save others. But as a whole the church definitely did not play the role it should and could have played as the Body of Christ! Several church leaders openly told about the division in their own churches and the shameful fighting amongst leaders. Other churches are still in the “denial phase”. The past years a long road has been travelled but there is still a long way to go.

On the third day (Saturday) the official confessions were done in the football stadium – a meeting that lasted, according to African tradition, 5,5 hours. Each of the involved Western countries read, whilst kneeling, a confession letter to



confess the sins en injustice of his nation and to ask for forgiveness. We, the



Belgian delegation, had prepared a letter that was signed by the Evangelical Alliance Flanders³. It made an impression on the Africans to see how Europeans humbled themselves and came in a completely other spirit than the former colonizers. How ever deep the pain and how bad the injustice that was done to them by the white people (“muzungu”), when they see true humility, the Africans are quick to forgive! At the end black and white



wholeheartedly forgave each other and hugged. The Anglican bishop also asked forgiveness to the neighbouring countries present for that which Rwanda (or the fleeing militias) had caused

² The church services and teaching were in Latin during the first decennia! The Rwandese word for “God”, “Imana” was rejected by white missionaries as a pagan god...

³ This letter you can also see on www.pray4belgium.be.



over the borders with regard to misery and injustice. The mayor of the district was present and told how pleased she was with this happening. We hope and believe that this may have a healing result, also for their own mutual reconciliation process.

After this conference we returned to Kigali. The next morning (Sunday) some of us spoke in different churches and others visited

the church of pasteur Anastase, one of the founders of the reconciliation movement. In the evening we still heard some testimonies and enjoyed a performance of music, songs and beautiful dances by a children's choir made up of orphans.

Monday morning we visited CARSA, a Christian organisation started by some young people who work for reconciliation, assistance and rebuilding; again we heard impressive stories and we could admire the hard work and many sacrifices that have been made (the three young university graduates had given up their job to start this organisation and lived by faith). In the afternoon we had the opportunity to visit the local art market to buy some souvenirs for home and our supporters.



The next day we had an appointment in the office of the National Commission for Reconciliation and Unity. This government appointed commission lead by Fatuma Ntangiza listened attentively to our story and expressed a lot of appreciation. The commission advocates already since 1999 for reconciliation on all levels, for justice (trials for the 120.000 prisoners⁴) and the return of all refugees, with all related problems. After the genocide the government did not seek revenge against the Hutu's, but advocated restoration and reconciliation. But Mrs Ntangiza stressed continuously that real reconciliation (in the heart!) is the work of the church. She asked the Europeans to

clearly tell this story in their own countries (what this report is about!)⁵. At the end she invited us to tell the whole story again at a large conference in October when the Commission will celebrate its 10th anniversary. After this meeting there was a TV team that interviewed several of us for television.

The same evening we were on the plane, full of impressions and many things to digest. One thing is clear: if forgiveness and reconciliation is possible by God's power in Rwanda, it is possible anywhere in this world. In the deepest darkness God sometimes performs the biggest miracles.

Ignace Demaerel

⁴ Trial is an essential part of reconciliation: if there is no punishment (as in the years 1959-1963) this injustice continues to feed anger. If these 120.000 prisoners would be tried in the normal way it would take 180 years! That is why people's courts of justice (Gacaca's) have been set up to put offenders to trial in their own village, amidst witnesses. Those who confessed their faults honestly received less punishment and half of it has been transferred to community service.

⁵ Some Europeans already have plans to publish these testimonies in a book to spread the message to the rest of the world.