

News/Feature

Rwanda: Harvest of hope

This is the third of four articles on Africa. Next week's article will be in the Features section with information on Africa Night which is taking place on February 6 in the SUB

by N. Cameron

"The development of Rwanda lies on the shoulders of its sons and daughters."

- Juvénal Habyarimana (President of Rwanda)

The country of Rwanda is a tiny piece of Africa, but it has seen a lot of activity. Situated on the eastern lip of the Rift Valley, which splits Africa from Ethiopia to Mozambique, Rwanda looks out over the birthplace of the human species. In addition to experiencing the Rift itself, Rwanda has felt its northwestern corner pushed up to a height of almost 15,000 feet by the Virunga Mountains - a series of volcanoes - one of which is still active. (The Virungas gained international attention through the work of Dian Fossey with a rare subspecies - the mountain gorilla, which exists only in the rain forest of Rwanda.)

Although the geologic history of Rwanda is quiet at the moment, its human history continues along a seam of turbulence. The factors which are currently at work in Rwanda are many - some having their roots in pre-colonial days, others of newer origin. When the pastoralists Tutsi tribe came to Rwanda some 300 years before European colonials, they found the land occupied by a small pocket of the original Twa, and a larger group of Hutu, who practiced farming. The Tutsi, although small in number, subdued the Twa and Hutu groups, and imposed a system of feudalism resembling that existing contemporaneously in Europe. Successive German and Belgian administrators found it convenient to allow Tutsi rule to remain in place.

As outside technology filtered in to the landlocked African country, health care began to have an impact on the demography. The advent of new medicines and of pre and post natal care slowed the rates of both adult and infant mortality. Population growth, further stimulated by the condemnatory stand on the use of artificial birth control taken by the Roman Catholic Church (which had a following of over half the Rwandan populace), began to upset the ecological balance. The land itself, eroded and sterile from centuries of deforestation and over-

farming, could produce less and less food, while the number of mouths depending on it were increasing.

Political unrest grew during the 1950s. The Hutu - the majority of the people in Rwanda (up to 90% of the population) - sought to throw off the yoke of feudalism and to depose the Tutsi king. In 1959, the Hutu rebelled. A bloody revolution, resisted fiercely by the ruling class, ended with waves of the outnumbered Tutsi fleeing to the neighboring countries of Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi, and Zaire. By

where a student could go to be trained in a trade or craft (such as carpentry, wood-working, or carving). Semi-private (partially subsidized by the government) and private schools also arose, some set up by associations of concerned parents. But upon obtaining their degrees, skilled young people found there were still no jobs.

Rwanda remains a country whose economy is one of 90% subsistence agriculture. Shortly after independence, an internal migration of the population - from the south and the north, toward the less settled east-

goats, sheep and poultry provide meat, milk, and eggs for a family's sustenance.

Yet the problems of land shortage and soil depletion continue to press in upon a beleaguered people. Each Rwandan family, averaging four to five children and two parents, requires a minimum of two hectares to support it. At the time of this writing, the average land-holding is only 1.5 hectares; some families have even less, as farms are divided over and over again among successive generation of children at times of inheritance. The whole

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government; their purposes cover a wide range of activities - a co-op could be a depository for savings, or a project for digging wells in the dry East or piping water from the mountainous North or building a community school or hall, etcetera. Perhaps more than the practical service they provide, the value of NGO's and co-ops lies in their ability to make people aware of the "larger picture."

While it might seem that the problems faced by the country would preclude any enjoyment of life, Rwandans renew themselves in the same sorts of activities which characterize human social existence anywhere. Dances can transport the people into another day and age: "Intore" - the dance of the warriors - can last an hour as the men exhibit their skills of war, with a leopard skin draped around their waist, and spears and shield in hand. Or both men and women dance in the "ikinimba," as a series of couples in a circle or semi-circle, with people clapping in the background. Perhaps a quieter moment might find a group squatting around a double row of 32 holes scooped out of the ground, to win each other's portion of beads or stones in "igisoro" - a game of strategy.

Most often, guests are invited into their friends' Rwandan homes - characterized by the stark geometric designs frescoed on the outer walls in black, white, and pink (the same colors displayed in makeup on the faces of the dancers). The drink which flows most freely at Rwandan social gatherings is banana wine, made out of one of the several local varieties of banana.

While a glass of banana wine may offer a pleasant distraction, perhaps the real hope for Rwandans ferments beneath the waters of Lake Kivu: Here lies a vast reserve of natural gas, thought to be among the largest in the world. This renewable resource has been harnessed in Brazil to fuel vehicles and to produce electricity; a pilot project in Rwanda, in joint association with Zaire (on the other side of the lake), has recently been launched, to determine the feasibility and the applicability of such a venture in East Africa.

Upon the shoulders of the sons and daughters of Rwanda lies the prospect of tapping the mighty resource which sprawls beneath the waters of Kivu, and of doing it in such a way that it will benefit all the people of the country, and will not harm the environment which cradles them. But they are not alone, for it is said that "God spends the daytime abroad, and sleeps the night in Rwanda."



A traditional home in Rwanda.

1962, independence was in place.

Shortly after independence (and the creation of a handful of political parties), the Rwandans began the process of redistributing lands and resources. A quota system was set up, under which access to jobs and public utilities was meted out according to demographic factors. More changes were in store. In the arena of politics, by the late 1960s, Rwanda had gone from having several political parties, to having a coalition, to having a single party formed out of the members of that coalition. In 1973, the military took over; in 1975 the leaders of that coup created a new single party government.

Under the long rule of the military, other reforms were introduced to the education system. (In fact, 25% of the national budget was directed towards education - only 7% was spent on defense.) The length of primary schooling was extended in 1976 - from six years to 'six plus two'. The additional two years of instruction were intended to train students in agriculture or crafts, and to hone their productivity. Despite the optimism of the theory, in practice, students found there were no jobs. At the request of the citizens, the additional two years of schooling were dropped.

Although, technically, five to seven years of high school follow primary school in Rwanda, there is a severe shortage of secondary schools. As a practical alternative, the government created schools

ern section of Rwanda - soon filled that quarter as well. With their families eking out a bare existence on a crowded land, some people sought work outside the country, to bring in wages. Even before independence, workers had laboured in the Belgian-owned mines in the Congo (now Zaire) or on large farms owned by others. Many Rwandan farming families moved out into the open expanse of Zaire, to the west, to start new farms. To the east, the government of Tanzania offered a re-settlement program for Rwandans seeking new land.

For the farmers remaining within Rwanda, the government has tried to act as a shield from the vagaries of the world market. The hilly terrain of Rwanda lends itself to terracing, and, during the time of Belgian administration, cash crops of coffee and tea (as well as quinquina - a malarial medication) were planted. The country's economy is largely dependent on the world coffee and tea market. For a time, the Rwandan government was able to guarantee a set price to farmers for the coffee they produced. But, with the current prolonged drop in world coffee prices, it has been impossible to continue with this program of rate subsidization.

As a result, some farmers are uprooting tea and coffee plants, and replacing them with traditional subsistence food crops. Wheat, peas, brown beans, and sorghum are sown on the hills, and rice in the marshes of the east and south. Cows,

country of Rwanda has just a little over 26,000 square kilometers - and is trying to support a population of seven and a half million people.

Growing dissatisfaction on the part of the general populace led the government to introduce more reforms. The single-party system was abolished by law in 1991, thus opening the way for a multi-party system. By April 1992, a transitional government had been devised: a coalition consisting of the former ruling party plus four opposition parties who had fought to win their positions. No elections have been held. Speculation holds that general elections will be held sometime over the next two years. In the meantime, there has been a proliferation of over fifty fledgling political parties.

In a nation with such demands on its limited resources, the aid provided by external NGO's (non-governmental organizations, such as Oxfam) has been growing in importance ever since independence. Initially, the people of Rwanda organized themselves into local associations or cooperatives, whether based on age (youths/elders), geographical district, or whatever criteria. This cooperative movement has proved very successful in Rwanda, and very effective in combating the divisive forces which have served to splinter the country into smaller and smaller pieces. The establishment of cooperative organizations is encouraged by the

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