

This is the testimony of Venancia, a survivor of the Rwandan genocide

I was born in Cyangugu. After the President's death, things deteriorated quickly in our neighbourhood. On 9th April, our houses were set ablaze and our belongings were looted and destroyed. Most people were able to escape the fires by taking shelter in the bush. Once the blaze died down, we set off to take sanctuary in the local school, which had been converted into a makeshift refugee camp. In all there was my father, my older sister, my two younger sisters and two younger brothers.

We found a lot of refugees there, about two thousand, mostly in the workshop and other buildings of the school. The councillor of the school calmed us down, telling us that security was guaranteed. But this was just a big lie. On the 13th, three days after our arrival at the school, we noticed that the councillor was working with people that we knew to be killers.

Many people recognised me, as I had been a pupil at the school for eight years, and had later joined a secondary school in the same sector.

On the night of 11th April, some thugs came to the school and selected the girls they were going to rape all night long. I was misfortunate as I was among those they wanted to rape. All night long, one man after the other raped us. We screamed in pain at the beginning, by the early hours of morning we couldn't cry anymore. We had to just bite our lip to ease the pain. We were taken back to the office the next day.

The next night I was taken off by a man who had a shop close to the school. I had to spend the night with him. The following night he returned for me again. But when he took me this time, there were two of them. He had invited *interahamwe* to join him. All night long they both raped me. I spent all night between these cursed assassins.

On the morning of the 13th, when they came for me again, I did not make any fuss. On the way, I asked them to give me a minute while I relieved myself in a bush by the road. They let me go and I hurried and pretended to squat down. When I saw them look away I ran for it. I did not stop, running faster and faster down the valley. As it began to get dark, I knew they wouldn't catch me. I heard them calling my name and cursing, saying they would get me in the morning.

I went to a Hutu friend's house. They agreed to hide me for a night, but I had to promise that I would leave early in the morning before anyone found out that they had hidden me.



While at their house we heard some loud explosions in the distance. A great cloud of dust could be seen in the night sky. I understood that it must be all over for my family who were among the refugees in the school. While still absorbing the sad news, the two men came to the house where I was hiding. Don't ask me how they knew I was there. Friends are not always what they seem.

One of the men said that I was an accomplice of the rebels. They said that they had killed my family, claiming I was the only snake left. They then told me to say my prayers because my hour of death had come. They led me away.

I cannot forget 14th April. Never. I cannot begin to count the number of times that they raped me before we arrived back at the school. Every place where there was a bush or a forest, they raped me. The choice was clear, between death and this.

When we finally arrived back at the school it was covered with corpses of those killed in the massacres of the night before, including members of my family. There was a nauseating smell everywhere. I went sort of crazy when I saw how the bodies of my father, and two younger brothers, had been blown up. I cried out very loud, telling the *interahamwe* to kill me. On the contrary, a third militia arrived, stronger than the other two, carrying a grenade and a sword.

I was glad because I thought he was coming to decapitate me. But I was wrong. He bargained with my captors, paying them 500 Rwandese Francs to have me for a wife. I knew the man who bought me. He took me to his home and raped me as much as he wanted. He left me locked up when he went out to kill. I tried to kill myself, but failed. I cried all the time while in captivity, I had no one to soothe my pain.

With no other choice, I had to get used to the torture. Friends of my captor came home every night to drink and talk about how many Tutsis they had killed. I don't believe anyone could know the suffering I endured and the grief I carry. I ended up in the Democratic Republic of Congo when this man escaped from Rwanda and took me with him. In exile I found I was pregnant, and thank God, I had a miscarriage. In December 1994, I managed to escape back to Rwanda, helped by another Tutsi woman who had married a Hutu.

I was raped by terrible men, assassins. Even now I am not absolutely sure. I think there is an 80 percent chance that I have contracted HIV virus. I feel strong at the moment, but perhaps the virus is just in its incubation.



The loss of my family is never far from my thoughts. My anguish is made all the greater, in light of fears for my health. Before the genocide, we were a family of ten; well-off, and happy. Now there are only two of us left, my sister and I. We can't work our land and have no means to earn a living. My experience has left me miserable and feeling isolated. I was only 19 years when my world shattered.

Today's Reading of the Testimonies marks the 15th Anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, in support of survivors like Venancia.