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Cheers to a new Rwanda

Rwanda was a broken country after the genocide in 1994. But today, it is a purposeful and safe land. Playing a role in its rebirth are Singapore and a circle of global players, like Starbucks and former US president Bill Clinton, who believe Rwanda is an emblem of what's possible in Africa.

By Lee Siew Hua, Senior Writer



Rwandan trainers join in a traditional Singapore 'yum seng' ritual to toast their seven-week stint here. They had undergone intensive fine-tuning of their culinary, computer, construction and other skills at Singapore institutions earlier this year. The dinner at a yacht club was hosted by the Singapore Cooperation Enterprise, an agency that helps the Singapore Government help other governments. -- PHOTO: SINGAPORE COOPERATION ENTERPRISE

THE world believed Rwanda was destined to be a failed state after the genocide in 1994. One million lives were lost in 100 days on a horrific scale and speed never before imagined. For survivors, it was a land of the walking dead.

Death, 15 years later, is still the paramount image when Rwanda is remembered. However, Singapore, which loves to spot winners, sees an entire country on the move. It is now a player in the rebirth of Rwanda.

It is doing what it has done best since Singapore itself was an improbable nation in the 1960s: It is taking on the singularly pragmatic task of building vital institutions for a vulnerable land, this time Rwanda.

Rwanda's gross domestic product per capita, at US\$1,600 (S\$2,200), is almost similar to Singapore's in 1962. Singapore is involved in several realms: Rwanda's civil aviation and city planning, social security and skills development.

It has offered this public-sector expertise to the distant East African nation in the past couple of years.

The lead agency is the Singapore Cooperation Enterprise, a fleet-footed force of road warriors. The agency was formed in 2006 by the Ministry of Trade and Industry and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to respond effectively to the many foreign requests to tap on Singapore's development experience. Its ranks include retired senior civil servants who had sheltered the nation, shaped its systems and sped it to First World status.

Such appealing elements of our development model are prized by scores of nations such as Rwanda, China and states in the Middle East.

While the work in Rwanda appears wholly pragmatic, the government in its capital Kigali sees Singapore in a more transcendent light.

The island is an inspirational model for little Rwanda which aims to be a middle-income country by 2020 and desires to be the Singapore of Africa.

Says Mr Francis Gatare, 42, chairman of the Rwanda Workforce Development Authority: 'Singapore's remarkable economic achievement is an inspiration to any country that aspires to take its destiny in its hands.'

'You are achievers who have gone ahead of us,' says the Canadian-trained economist and presidential adviser, who returned in 2000.

His view of Singapore was widely shared by dozens of policymakers and residents in the eight days that Saturday Special spent in Kigali and its green environs.

Some had also been interviewed in Singapore between March and July when 100 senior officials and instructors made training trips all over the island.

In the conversations, what shone brightest was Rwanda's story of recovery and its cast of 10 million.

These are the Rwandans who are self-reliant and pragmatic in an innovative style much like Singaporeans - and they have somehow managed to forgive killers, so that their country can move on.

Reminders of the genocide - carried out less by a military killing machine than by ordinary Hutus fuelled by hate propaganda on radio - are omnipresent. The tragedy is discussed openly in interviews, yet also framed quite optimistically as a transforming tide for the country.

So genocide and growth are linked paradoxically in the story of Rwanda.

This is evident to political scientist Jean Paul Kimonyo, 45, who heads the Strategy and Policy Unit in the office of President Paul Kagame.

Born in exile in Burundi, he holds a Canadian passport. He pursued his PhD in Canada and returned to Rwanda for good in 2002, one of many diasporic talents who left established careers to rebuild the land with passion.

The national quest for success is rooted in the genocide. This drive involves vast efforts to uplift the economy, he says, and to embed it in the East African Community of 120 million people.

Most of all, it involves bringing a new spirit of purpose to Rwanda.

'At the root, this is to make sure that genocide will never happen again,' he emphasises.

The Rwandans' common enemy is really poverty, the President has said. One-third of the people live in extreme poverty and he is mobilising citizens to fight it, not one another.

Country's self-reliance a beacon of hope to rest of Africa

As information Minister Louise Mushikiwabo, 47, sees it, 'genocide is an extreme form of conflict that is based on an ideology - but poverty makes it easier to succeed because it's much easier to manipulate people who are poor'.

The Hutu youth militias who killed Tutsis and moderate Hutus were young men with no future and nothing to lose, adds the former Washington lobbyist.

With this consuming focus on growth, the leaders are very mindful that skilled manpower is a big key for development.

This is an overriding concern for Education Minister Charles Murigande, who begins by listing what Rwanda is doing right: 'We have tried to put in place good laws for investment.

'We are by and large a country that is free from corruption and crime. It's a very peaceful country.'

The President has fired Cabinet ministers for corruption while city signs bluntly state: 'Corruption - Zero Tolerance.'

It is also safe for women to walk in the clean, orderly city at night or in the early dawn hours, as Saturday Special did. Reserved Rwandans keep a dignified distance.

Despite such bright signs, Dr Murigande is upfront in saying: 'Whenever we convince investors to come and look at opportunities, most say we don't have very skilled human resources.

'So we decided to partner Singapore to develop human capacity.'

In this light, Singaporean consultants have pitched in to create a sound system of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET).

Chicago entrepreneur Joe Ritchie, 62, who chairs the Rwanda Development Board, has praise for the TVET push and Singapore's 'sensational' role in this.

'The payoff for TVET is higher than anything I know,' he says.

Invest about US\$1,000 (S\$1,400) in three months of training, and a worker's earnings go up about US\$600, he explains.

Human talent is vital for both the small states, neither of which is well endowed with natural resources. While Rwanda does export tea and coffee - Starbucks and Costco are top coffee buyers - it is one of the tinier African countries and the most densely populated.

So there are more parallels than Singaporeans imagine, even though the two nations appear worlds apart.

Both are also self-reliant places, though for different reasons.

Rwanda remembers that the international community looked the other way during the genocide. In that light, it far prefers trade with the world, not aid.

Dr Jean Paul Kimonyo of the Strategy and Policy Unit, an official think-tank, remarks: 'The President is changing the aid establishment, saying, 'Yes, aid is okay but we should also look at ending it.'

The bigger picture is that Rwanda's self-reliance can be a beacon. 'Africans are supposed to be failures but to see that Rwanda is able to stand on its own feet, I think, makes a global imprint,' he says.

This is one reason why Rwanda's rise feels significant for nations and non-profits with a stake in Africa. If Rwanda can succeed, so can the continent.

It is interesting that observers also feel that Rwanda and Singapore share an affinity for pragmatic innovations.

On the last Saturday morning of every month, the populace wakes up early to build schools, maintain roads, prune plants - any kind of work in their own neighbourhood, even affluent ones.

Because Rwanda is so poor, this saves money while bonding people.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong himself has pictured a certain shared destiny. 'Like Rwanda, Singapore too had to build a nation from scratch,' he said when hosting a dinner for President Paul Kagame who visited in May last year.

'Many doubted if we would survive as a sovereign nation, let alone thrive and prosper,' Mr Lee continued.

'But we worked relentlessly to make a living for ourselves, upgraded our capabilities to stay ahead of the competition, and so have survived and thrived in an uncertain and rapidly changing world.'

Rwanda, too, has a mesmerising dream of development. It already pictures itself as the emerging Singapore of Africa.

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