

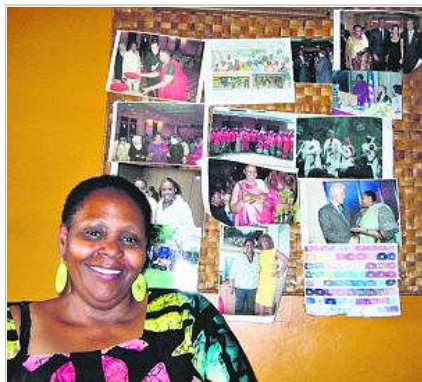
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THE NEW RWANDANS

Global seller of peace baskets



(Above) Entrepreneur Janet Nkubana has fans the world over, including former US president Bill Clinton, whose picture is on the wall behind her. MsNkubana brings together both Hutu and Tutsi women (next photo) under one roof in rural Rwanda to weave peace baskets for export. -- ST PHOTO: LEE SIEW HUA

ENTREPRENEUR Janet Nkubana's peace baskets are woven by women on both sides of the genocide - Hutus and Tutsis.

Sold in New York and Tokyo, the baskets put cash and hope in their hands.

In the days after the genocide, MsNkubana, 46, travelled from church to church to mobilise basket weavers in rural Rwanda. Her message is the same to the wives of both killers and victims: There's hope for all.

As the women wove under one roof, hatred faded over time.

'The government put in place tools of reconciliation. Some prayed to God,' she says. 'It is not easy. We still think about the genocide as a nation.'

She tells the story of a Tutsi who lost 65 family members. Their bodies are buried in a big graveyard next to her house. Yet, when she faced a killer at a community court, she said: 'I want to forgive this man. My neighbours are my new family.'

The woman, Ms Iphigenia Mukantabana, now leads a weaving circle.

The business has blossomed into a cooperative hiring 3,000 across the land.

MsNkubana went global in 2002 when she displayed baskets at the Smithsonian. Macy's in New York soon sold her wares. It now buys up to 50,000 baskets yearly.

Each basket is a message of peace for the world. Each carries the Rwanda story.

Talkshow doyenne Oprah Winfrey has featured the baskets. And former US president Bill Clinton buys them as gifts on his journeys to Rwanda.

Woven from papyrus, bamboo and banana leaves gathered from the rainforest, the gorgeous grain baskets, platters and decor fill MsNkubana's workshop.

Their modest makers sit in bright rooms, under a tree. They make twine of jewel colours fly like brilliant dragonflies.

'The faces of the women are bright,' says MsNkubana. 'You can get out of poverty.'

LEE SIEW HUA

