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France, steeped in genocidal blood, must face trial

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The hastily arranged car boot sale outside the French Embassy in downtown Kigali last Monday did good business. On offer were laptop computers, televisions, three-piece suites and, well, even the cars themselves. Given the decision taken by the Rwandan Government ten days ago to expel the French Ambassador, his staff and to close all official French buildings in the tiny Central African country, there was clearly little expectation of a return.

Behind these scenes of gloomy embassy employees packing and selling their diplomatic and domestic baggage is a recent history between France and Rwanda steeped in a mire of blood and guilt. Indeed it is the second time in 12 years that the French have found the need for a sudden retreat from Rwanda.

In April 1994 the French Embassy became the setting for the formation of the extremist Hutu Government that was to organise and carry out the meticulously planned genocide of the Tutsis. Witnesses spoke of these ministers, many now facing life imprisonment for crimes against humanity, sitting in plush embassy chairs comparing notes on where the killing was going best. Their host, the French Ambassador, later helped to evacuate those extremists to Paris, away from the apocalypse they had created. The ambassador then made a bonfire of two rooms piled high with documents linking his Government with that of the Hutu dictatorship of Juvénal Habyarimana.

Rwanda is made up mainly of two ethnic groups, the vast majority being Hutu, who, under Habyarimana's "apartheid" State, took total control of the army, bureaucracy and government. The Tutsi, 15 per cent of the population, were banished from public life.

When François Mitterrand, then the French President, decided in 1990 to send in crack paratroopers to protect Habyarimana, his French-speaking friend and ally, it looked like just another attempt by Paris to keep a client leader in power. The danger came from

across the border in Uganda. Anglophone Paul Kagame and his Rwandan Patriotic Front, made up mostly of Tutsis previously driven from their homeland by a series of earlier massacres, had invaded.

During the next three years Mitterrand had no compunction in sending in troops to save a brutal and corrupt regime. The Hutu army received millions of dollars of French weaponry; and the French elite training corps trained its Rwandan allies in how to dismember bodies, fire its new heavy artillery and use attack Gazelle helicopters.

Habyarimana was assassinated on April 6, 1994, when unknown assailants shot down his Falcon 50 jet, another present from the French taxpayer. The event ushered in possibly the hundred bloodiest days in history. Up to one million Tutsis were slaughtered.

As the body count grew, France welcomed ministers of the genocidal Government to an official reception in Paris. Meanwhile, its military continued to send arms to bolster its Hutu allies in power, regardless of the genocide they were perpetrating.

Since 1994 France has been adept at trying to hide this stain on *la gloire*. Its ministers, including the current Prime Minister, constantly repeat the “double genocide” myth, which alleged that while Hutu killed Tutsi, the Tutsi also killed Hutu. It is akin to claiming that Holocaust victims were also mass murderers.

So the latest French government attempt to cover its Rwandan shame is no surprise to observers of *La Françafrique*. The timing behind the sudden release of Judge Jean-Louis Bruguière's report, which blames Kagame for Habyarimana's death, is no coincidence. Four senior French military and political figures will shortly give testimony before the international war crimes tribunal in Arusha. They have been called by the defence team of Colonel Théoneste Bagosora, who faces charges of being the mastermind behind the genocide.

It is deeply embarrassing, like being called to defend Nazis at Nuremberg. Shortly, too, Kagame's government of reconciliation, which drove the *genocidaire* out in 1994, will announce the findings of its own inquiry into the French involvement in the genocide. It promises to uncover even more explicit details of Mitterrand's crime.

President Kagame arrived in London on Sunday for a five-day visit to the UK. His 12-year-old Government has revived a country torn apart by genocide, corruption and poverty. He has emphasised there is no “Hutu” or “Tutsi” in his country now, only Rwandans. But while he has created a stable economy and new sense of pride, it is vital that the world, which looked the other way in 1994, now demands answers from France about its direct complicity in the genocide.

There seems to be an unwritten rule among Western leaders not to question each other's foreign policies too closely. But genocide cannot be allowed to be so cynically forgotten. Tony Blair has a duty to ask some deeply troubling questions about how and why the Élysée supported a genocidal government before, during and after one of the most appalling episodes of killing the world has ever seen. He may put at risk having some of his own skeletons unearthed. But the dead and the traumatised survivors in Rwanda deserve such belated recognition — and respect.

Andrew Wallis is the author of *Silent Accomplice: The Untold Story of France's Role in the Rwandan Genocide*