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BY STEPHEN KINZER

As last summer's World Cup was approaching its climax, an argument broke out during dinner at the home of Rwandan President Paul Kagame. One of his sons announced that he was rooting for France, the team of his favorite player, Thierry Henry.

"How can you root for France?" his older brother protested. "They were fighting against father!"

President Kagame, by his own account, smiled but said nothing. A few days later, he flew to Berlin for the World Cup finals, and there he chatted with President Jacques Chirac of France. "We didn't have any problem," he reported.

Beneath that diplomatic correctness, however, lies a seething confrontation. It has just reached a new peak, with bitter charges and a decision by Rwanda to cut diplomatic relations with France.

In October, the Rwandan government launched an official inquiry into France's role in the 1994 genocide that took at least 800,000 lives. That inquiry, according to a government statement, "is expected to clarify the roles individuals in the French establishment played" and also consider "whether their activities are criminally indictable."

Just a few weeks after this commission began its investigation, a judge in France issued a stunning accusation against 10 Rwandan officials, including President Kagame. He said they may have shot down the plane carrying Rwanda's then-president, Juvenal Habyarimana, on April 6, 1994.

This suddenly intense dispute is a new chapter in the long and often turbulent relationship between France and the bloc of French-speaking countries known as the Francophonie. Kagame has become France's least favorite African leader. He is doing what no one has ever attempted: taking his country out of the French sphere of influence, changing the language of government from French to English and even applying for membership in the British Commonwealth. His inquiry into France's role in the genocide is another brazen challenge. So when Judge Jean-Louis Bruguiere issued his report in Paris, some saw it as a sign that France was fighting back.

Rwanda, formerly a Belgian colony, was part of the French cultural sphere for most of the 20th century. Its elite spoke French, and after it gained independence in 1962, it fell fully into France's economic and political orbit. The Rwandan leader from 1973 to 1994, Habyarimana was among President Francois Mitterrand's closest African friends and allies. Their sons were in business together, reportedly dealing in arms, among other

commodities.

In 1990, a group of Rwandan exiles, led by Kagame, invaded the country. They had grown up speaking English, mostly in Uganda and Tanzania, and the French saw them, according to historian Gerard Prunier, as part of "an obvious 'Anglo-Saxon' plot." Eager to defend its client regime, France trained and armed units that fought against Kagame's rebel force; other French-trained units helped carry out the 1994 genocide. Then, after the genocidal regime fell and Kagame's rebels came to power, French soldiers established a "Turquoise Zone" along the southwestern border, through which many accused genocidaires escaped to other countries. Several prominent ones settled in France.

Whether Kagame was involved in shooting down Habyarimana's plane in 1994 is an old question. There never has been a serious investigation, and the passage of time makes it unlikely that the culprit will ever be definitively identified.

Most who have studied the case, however, reject the theory that Kagame was responsible. They come to another conclusion: that radicals within the Habyarimana regime probably committed the crime. Habyarimana had signed a peace accord giving rebels a large voice in the government, and radicals did not want to see it implemented. They were, Amnesty International concluded, "the only ones who would benefit from a disruption to the peace process."

After the genocide, Kagame emerged as Rwanda's new strongman. He has shown himself to be fiercely independent and often denounces "bullies" who try to pressure African leaders. His government's letter breaking off relations charged that France was bent on "destroying" Rwanda.

Bruguere's 65-page report is based only on allegations from purported witnesses and evidence from what he described as missile fragments. He requested international arrest warrants for nine Rwandan officials. (Kagame, as a head of state, has immunity.) Yet he did not conduct an investigation, consider other possible suspects or visit Rwanda. But even if his bold accusation ultimately proves baseless, it comes at a bad time for Kagame. In the last couple of years, Rwanda has attracted the attention of many influential Americans, from Bill Gates to Andrew Young to the evangelical preacher Rick Warren. Young said in a recent speech that Rwanda has become a model for Africa and "as honest a place as you're going to find on the face of the Earth." Development specialists are flocking there. Now Kagame, whose leadership has generated all this excitement, stands accused of a great crime.

After the accusation was made public, thousands of Rwandans took to the streets in protest. Some burned French flags. In a speech to a packed stadium, Kagame called the charges "all rubbish" and denounced the French as "perpetrators."

"The French should try themselves," he told the cheering crowd. "They killed our people."

France's foreign minister, Philippe Douste-Blazy, asserted this week that issuing charges against Kagame and his aides was "a judicial decision" and "not a political decision by the French government." It is all but impossible to know whether that is true. Nonetheless, France has succeeded in casting Kagame and his government in a dubious light. That sent a clear warning to other potential challengers: France still has ways to strike back against those who defy its power.

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