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'Some prisons are prisons, and others are like hell.'

Prison life in Rwanda in the ten years after the genocide

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This article describes the extraordinary environment in the prisons in Rwanda in the ten years that followed the 1994 genocide and the systems prisoners put in place to survive. It details the multiple, creative ways in which prisoners overcame extreme overcrowding, life-threatening conditions, and years of incarceration without trial.

The article is based on the field research I conducted for my book *Le Château: the lives of prisoners in Rwanda*, which documents Rwandan prisoners' experiences of incarceration between 1994 and 2004. Sections of my book are synthesised in this article. The primary research, carried out in late 2004, included interviews with around 200 prisoners, prison staff, former prisoners, families of prisoners, government officials and representatives of non-governmental organisations. My research focused on five prisons — Kigali Central Prison, Butare, Gitarama, Cyangugu and Nsinda — and I gathered additional information on several other civilian and military prisons and detention centres.

Since I completed that research, several thousand prisoners have been released, and the conditions in Rwanda's prisons have improved. Recent developments are summarised in the final section of this article.

Rwanda's prisons after the genocide

Between April and July 1994, more than half a million people were massacred in Rwanda in a genocide meticulously planned by political leaders from the majority Hutu ethnic group against the Tutsi minority. The organisers of the genocide made sure that responsibility for the killings was carried by as many people as possible: the genocide was perpetrated not only by the security forces and by the notorious *interahamwe* militia but by thousands of ordinary Hutu civilians.

The huge number of perpetrators meant that it was difficult to pinpoint who had participated in the killings and who had not. On the surface, any Hutu

could be a genocide suspect. As a result, tens of thousands of people were arrested in the following years. Known in Rwanda as *génocidaires* — a term used to refer to a person who participated or is accused of participating in the genocide — , these were the people who made up the bulk of the prison population in the years that followed the genocide.

This context gave rise to a unique situation in Rwanda's prisons. Some of those arrested were undoubtedly guilty of participating in the massacres, but others were innocent. Arrests often took place arbitrarily, on the basis of unsubstantiated denunciations. Accusing someone of genocide became an easy way of settling personal scores. With the justice system in tatters, tens of thousands of people spent years in prison without trial, in inhuman conditions, often in the absence of evidence that they had committed any crime. Many of the prisoners I met in 2004 had been detained for nine or ten years without any form of judicial process. Some did not even know the specific charges against them. Their case-files were either empty or simply labelled with the blanket accusation 'genocide'. Meanwhile, many of the real perpetrators remained at large.

Within months, Rwanda's prisons were overflowing, and there was no functioning justice system to process these cases. At its peak in around 1998, the prison population reached about 130,000. When I conducted my research in late 2004, there were still around 85,500 people in prison — more than 1 per cent of the country's population. Almost everyone in Rwanda has had at least one relative or friend in prison since 1994. The experience of arrest and detention became normalised.

Prison overcrowding is common across Africa, but in Rwanda in the mid to late 1990s, it reached unprecedented levels. Experienced staff of organisations who had worked in prisons in many different countries described the situation in Rwanda as unlike any other they had encountered.

Every aspect of life in Rwandan prisons was defined by overcrowding. Forty centimetres was the standard width of a prisoner's space — for those who

could afford any space at all. There was no room to lie down, no room to sit, barely room to stand. Many prisoners slept outside, exposed to the sun or the rain. Some prisoners had to keep walking until a space became available to rest. There were no cells. Prisoners were stuffed into large blocks, each holding several hundred people. In each block, there were structures resembling bunk-beds on three levels, with wooden planks lined up against each other. Those who could not get a space on a plank had to sleep on the ground, in a tiny space underneath the lowest plank. Others slept on the concrete floor between the bunk-beds, filling the corridors, while yet others slept in the kitchens and the showers. Some slept in the toilets, in drainage channels or over septic tanks. The courtyards and the blocks were so crowded that it could take several hours to reach the toilets. Long queues snaked round the blocks, as prisoners waited to fill their small jerrycans with water at a communal tap.

These conditions gave rise to exceptional forms of behaviour alongside very ordinary ones. Some of the prisoners' reactions were typical of those found in any situation of mass confinement: a combination of brutal selfishness and unexpected generosity, rivalry, creativity, resilience, patience and despair. But in the particular world of Rwanda's prisons, these universal traits were found in intense concentration. Every action, every pattern of behaviour became magnified.

The social composition of the prison population was also unusual: while in many countries, the majority of prisoners come from disadvantaged sectors of society, have a low level of education and include repeat offenders, in Rwanda, this profile was rare. Most of Rwanda's prisoners had never set foot in a prison before. They came from an astonishing array of backgrounds, ranging from rich government officials to poor peasants, with a high proportion of 'intellectuals' — a term Rwandans use to describe those with a good level of education: teachers, doctors, civil servants, engineers, priests, lawyers and even judges. The result was a hugely diverse, dynamic, skilled and complex prison population — a replica of the world outside.

The prisons were almost entirely run by the prisoners themselves, reinforcing the sense of a complete and self-sufficient society. Prisoner self-organisation is not unusual in Africa, but whereas in some countries, it breeds predatory behaviour, in Rwanda it generated innovation and pragmatic ingenuity. The extreme conditions in Rwanda's prisons posed particular challenges. While the prison administration, dramatically under-resourced and overwhelmed, played at best a passive role, the prisoners embraced these challenges with extraordinary efficiency. There was no time to waste: it was a matter of life and death.

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Indeed, between 1994 and 1999, thousands of prisoners died as a direct result of the severe overcrowding, absence of hygiene, lack of food and lack of medical treatment. Diseases spread rapidly and there were no facilities to contain them. Some prisoners had been so badly tortured before they even reached the prison that they did not withstand the ordeal. Prisoners told me stories of people who were too weak or too sick to move and died where they lay, trampled on accidentally by other prisoners; other had their feet or legs amputated because they had rotted from standing in filth and stagnant water for prolonged periods. Prisoners would wake up in the morning and find corpses lying next to them. In some prisons, in around 1995-1996, dozens of prisoners were

dying every day. Their bodies were piled up in a corner until someone removed them. It was almost impossible to sleep, not only because of the lack of physical space but because of the constant noise of thousands of people crammed into each prison. A former prisoner summarised the conditions during this period: 'Some prisons are prisons, and others are like hell.'

It is difficult to imagine how prisoners survived these conditions, but many did, and this was largely thanks to their own creativity. The International Committee of the Red Cross, which was eventually allowed access to the prisons, also saved many lives by providing basic assistance. In the following years, Penal Reform International set up a programme to help improve prison conditions in Rwanda and trained prison staff across the country.

The prisoners' government

In the devastation which followed the genocide, the new government of Rwanda had neither the capacity nor the interest to manage the situation in the prisons. The entire infrastructure of the country had been destroyed, so there were other priorities. The thousands of people filling up the jails were accused of the worst crime — genocide — and there was little public sympathy for their plight.

With no help coming from any quarter, the prisoners had to take control of the situation themselves. Imposing order on chaos, they took over the management of the prisons. Within a short time, they developed a multiplicity of organisational structures and activities. It was an immediate and effective survival mechanism.

Even once the government had set up a functioning prison administration, the prisons in Rwanda continued to be run by the prisoners. Their systems were so efficient that there was no immediate need to replace them. Over the years, the official prison administration became increasingly professionalised, but this did not impinge significantly on daily life inside the blocks; nor did it conflict with it. Prisoners took care of everything from the reception of new prisoners (with a special welcome committee), the allocation of space and the distribution of food and water, to hygiene, medical care, discipline and security. They organised education, leisure, cultural and religious activities, as well as legal advice and the dissemination of information. A prisoner-run radio station broadcast daily news on events inside each prison as well as national and international current affairs. Once the prison administration had set up a system of work for prisoners, the prisoners took that over too, organising work teams, schedules and rotas.

Rwanda is a very hierarchical and stratified society, in which successive governments have kept the population under tight control through a multi-tiered system of local administration, right down to units of just ten households. Reflecting this model, the prisoners set up their own hierarchy — a kind of prisoners' government. The big chief was the *capita général*. Overseeing several thousand prisoners, the *capita général* had one or two deputies, a secretary, security officers (sometimes called policemen), an army of local *capitas* in each of the blocks, and teams

responsible for each activity. Some *capitas* even had a public relations officer — the public being the rank and file prison population. There was a tight chain of command, with each of these officials reporting to their supervisors — all of them prisoners.

A former prisoner had developed his own terminology for the prison leaders:

Everything in prison was bought — food, water, soap, alcohol, mattresses, fabric for uniforms, fresh air, extra time with visitors — but the most important commodity was space.

It was like another government... The capita général is the president. The deputy capita is the prime minister. His secretary is the principal private secretary. The heads of department are the ministers... Medical and hygiene were the ministry of health; security was the army; the social department was the ministry of local administration and social affairs; the kitchen was the ministry of food... The prisoners imprisoned other prisoners. There was a brigadier chief and his deputy who were like the ministry of defence. If that ministry hadn't existed, we wouldn't have survived. They kept the 'roads' clear. There were people from the security department every ten metres to keep the roads open so that people could walk up and down.

They were like the traffic police.

The prisoners also instituted a sophisticated system of corruption, in which every privilege, however small, had a price tag. Everything in prison was bought — food, water, soap, alcohol, mattresses, fabric for uniforms, fresh air, extra time with visitors — but the most important commodity was space.

The system for allocating spaces to prisoners was tightly regulated, with a system of tariffs. It was overseen by the *capita général* and implemented by the *capitas* of the blocks. Although it was supposed to operate on a first come first served basis, in practice, wealth and favours determined who ended up where. For example, those with more money occupied spaces closer to the doors, where air circulated more freely, while poorer prisoners often ended up on the top bunks, where it was extremely hot. The social hierarchy of the prison was directly reflected in the hierarchy of space. Thus, in this environment where prisoners struggled to find even a square inch of space, wealthy inmates miraculously occupied large

areas or sat in comfortable alcoves, with some important prisoners enjoying an additional space they called a lounge where they would receive other prisoners. At the very top of the league, Kigali Central Prison had a VIP cell in which an archbishop, a former president and a minister were detained at different times.

The higher a prisoner's position in the system, the richer he or she could become. Prisoners described extensive rackets, with *capitas* amassing large amounts of money, sometimes with the complicity of prison directors. With wealth came status. The system was more pronounced among the men than the women, but it affected the way female prisoners perceived male prisoners, with women seeking the attention of male *capitas* in the hope of receiving gifts or developing relationships.

By and large, prisoners put up little resistance to the system; they complained from time to time but they knew the rules. Embracing these rules was their way of making sense of an otherwise terrifying world.

After a few years, the number of prisoners occupying positions of responsibility grew out of all proportion, despite the fact that a degree of stability had been restored and the number of prison staff increased. But taking on official functions had become such an effective form of escapism for prisoners, as well as a continuing source of income, that the system simply continued. It also benefited the prison staff, both materially and by reducing their workload.

The lack of space in the prisons meant that all categories of prisoners were thrown in together: *génocidaires*, rapists, robbers, petty criminals, all lived side by side. Prisoners did not spend much time finding out about the past of their fellow inmates. The pecking order was not determined by the nature of their alleged offences. There were more pressing questions: how to find a space to sleep, how to jump the queue for the showers, how to buy an extra portion of food.

Nevertheless, a certain ranking emerged, based loosely around education and professional status. The *génocidaires* — who accounted for more than 90 per cent of the prison population when I carried out my research — ruled the roost. They were the ones who occupied senior positions and laid down the law.

Given the high proportion of professional people who participated in the genocide, being a *génocidaire* was sometimes equated with having a high level of education, and *capitas* were required to have a minimum level of education. An elderly female prisoner told me: '*Those accused of genocide are in positions of responsibility because they are the most intelligent.*'

The position of *capita* conferred not only authority but prestige and honour. The *capitas* took their responsibilities seriously. They held weekly, or sometimes daily, meetings with their underlings, and the *capita général* would submit a daily report to the prison director, usually in writing, based on the contributions of all the local *capitas* of the blocks and other prisoners with specific duties.

In most prisons, the *capita* *général* was elected according to set procedures. In some prisons, candidates would write a manifesto laying out their plans, and, for those who had already served one or more terms, examples of their achievements. Prisoners then filled in a ballot paper and the votes were counted. In some smaller prisons, prisoners simply lined up behind the candidate of their choice or held meetings in which they would call out their approval or disapproval of particular candidates. In some prisons, however, prisoners claimed the prison director selected the *capita général* in advance. The more democratic the system, the more popularity the *capita général* appeared to enjoy.

Some prisoners were happy to take on responsibilities without official recognition or reward. They formed societies and clubs, such as Scouts or Red Cross societies, as well as a plethora of religious organisations. Others took on teaching and training responsibilities, putting to good use the professional skills they had acquired in a previous life. These activities served not only to pass the time, but to prepare prisoners for their eventual release. There were lessons in almost every subject imaginable — in which both the teachers and the students were prisoners, and teachers set exams and awarded diplomas. There were apprenticeships in which younger prisoners learned carpentry, metalwork, carving and painting, though their teachers would complain about the cost of buying materials from

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outside. English language classes were among the most popular. After the genocide, the new government of Rwanda set about changing the language of formal education from French to English. This meant that by the time many of these prisoners would be released, they would find it difficult to resume formal education or access certain types of employment without some command of English. They therefore set about learning English in prison, so diligently that by the time they were released, some were more fluent in English than students who had been taught by 'real' teachers in schools outside.

Computer technology was another popular subject — again, with an eye on future employment prospects. Computers were not available in the prisons, but this did not deter prisoners from learning the basic principles and familiarising themselves with the theory.

Social relations and solidarity

Unsurprisingly in such conditions, many prisoners' actions were motivated by basic interests and self-preservation: money, material comforts and associated privileges. But, there were also exceptional acts of compassion and mutual assistance. The extreme conditions appeared to bring out the best and the worst in prisoners. Once a prisoner had secured his or her own place in the system, he or she would willingly help others who were less fortunate. New arrivals were among the most vulnerable, as were sick, disabled or elderly prisoners. Many prisoners described to me how on their first day, they thought they would be crushed to death, die of disease or starvation, or lose their sanity, and it was only the kindness of a more experienced prisoner which saved them. In some cases, new prisoners encountered friends or relatives inside the prison: Rwanda is a small country, and it was not uncommon for whole families or groups of friends to be arrested and detained together. These would be their first point of support. But others described how complete strangers had taken pity on them and offered to share their tiny space, given them half their blanket or shared their food ration. A number of friendships developed in this way. Some were purely materialistic, but others turned into stronger, social bonds, which some prisoners sustained after their release.

The overcrowding in the prisons meant that sociability was imposed on prisoners. Whether they liked it or not, prisoners had to engage with each

other. Competition for space could have generated fierce disputes, but more often than not, the physical proximity turned into a source of solidarity and even support. Some prisoners described to me how some of their inmate friends occasionally appeared withdrawn or retreated into silence, but explained that these periods could never last long because the conditions did not allow for anyone to remain alone for any length of time. A similar explanation was given for the low rate of suicides: prisoners kept an eye on each other, and no one could do anything secretly.

During some of my interviews, prisoners asked me to describe conditions in European prisons. When I explained that prisoners had individual cells, or shared a cell with at most one or two others, some of them laughed. They did not seem to like the idea. One of them, who had endured some of the worst conditions in prison in Rwanda, told me he would rather be detained in a Rwandan prison than in the

prison of the UN-run International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in Arusha, Tanzania, where detainees are held in individual cells, in excellent conditions — simply because he would hate to be locked up in a cell on his own. To some extent, this reaction may reflect cultural differences: in Rwanda, most people are not used to living alone. But it was also clear that

for these prisoners, the prospect of solitude in prison was genuinely frightening, and interaction with other inmates was critical in helping them retain a sense of normality.

The prison staff

While the prisoners busily organised every aspect of life inside, the prison staff tended to occupy themselves with administrative matters in the background and rarely made their presence felt inside the blocks. The number of prison staff was surprisingly low: at the end of 2004, there were only around 1,000 prison staff in the whole of Rwanda, for a prison population of around 85,500. Of these, around 800 were guards. For example, in Butare central prison, one of the largest, there were only 64 guards and 12 administrative staff for more than 10,700 prisoners.

Each prison had one director, one or two deputy directors, a secretary, a registrar, an accountant, a social worker and a team of guards. In the early post-genocide period, prison staff, many of whom were former military, treated prisoners badly; there were frequent reports of beatings and gratuitous ill-

The extreme conditions appeared to bring out the best and the worst in prisoners.

treatment. In the subsequent years, as more civilian staff were recruited and professionally trained, these abuses decreased and relationships between staff and prisoners improved. By 2004, with a few exceptions, most of the staff I interviewed seemed fairly sympathetic to prisoners' needs.

To ensure the smooth running of the prison, the director would rely almost entirely on the *capita général* and his subordinates. His or her own interventions were limited to holding meetings with prisoners, occasionally carrying out searches, and investigating problems such as fights between prisoners (a surprisingly uncommon occurrence). Even then, most disputes were resolved by the prisoners themselves, and the director would only intervene if the matter got out of control. A close relationship between the director and the *capita général* was mutually advantageous, not only in terms of division of labour but in financial terms too. Prison directors were often personally implicated in the *capitas'* deals and creamed off a large share of the profits.

The guards were slightly more involved in the day-to-day running of the prisons. They made their presence felt during weekly prison visits, supervising a painful and humiliating ritual in which prisoners' families had just three minutes to talk to their relatives in the courtyard outside, squashed together on wooden benches — or in some prisons, standing up — with no privacy whatsoever and surrounded by so much noise that it was impossible to have a simple conversation. Guards appeared keen to demonstrate their position of authority by ensuring that visitors did not exceed the time allocated to them, occasionally hitting them with their wooden sticks or searching the food they brought to the prisoners.

As in many countries, prison guards in Rwanda are not well paid and are always on the lookout for

ways of earning extra money. At the same time, prisoners are forever devising new ways of improving their own conditions, so opportunities abound. In exchange for cash, guards can significantly enhance a prisoner's quality of life, whether by smuggling in forbidden goods, extending the time allocated for visits, delivering messages from relatives or other favours. Prisoners could establish close relationships with individual guards, and a kind of complicity developed. One prisoner told me: *'Guards and prisoners are like brothers. Relations are good. Even if there are problems, we reconcile quickly. The director once said that the guards and the prisoners are the same.'*

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Conclusion: 2004 to 2013

In late 2013, almost twenty years since the genocide, conditions in Rwanda's prisons have improved considerably. The prisons remain overcrowded but the conditions are not comparable to those which prevailed in previous years. Two waves of large-scale releases in 2003 and 2005, followed by further releases in the subsequent years as a result of trials in the community-based *gacaca* courts¹, have reduced the prison population. A system of community service known as TIG (*travaux d'intérêt général*), replacing a proportion of prison

sentences, has also contributed to decongesting the prisons.

In the last few years, the prison population in Rwanda has hovered between 55,000 and 60,000. In December 2013, the total prison population was 54,357.² The prison administration has rebranded itself as the Rwanda Correctional Service and has adopted a new motto: 'Justice, correction, knowledge and production'.³

These positive developments are welcome for existing and new prisoners, but mean little to the tens

1. Gacaca was a new, ambitious justice system introduced by the Rwandan government to tackle the huge number of genocide cases which the normal courts were unable to handle. Loosely based on the notion of community-based conflict resolution, *gacaca* was in reality a formal judicial process, with the stated objectives of delivering justice for the genocide and encouraging reconciliation. Between 2005 and 2012, thousands of *gacaca* courts tried almost two million cases, according to Rwandan government statistics. For further information, see reports by Penal Reform International http://www.penalreform.org/?s=rwanda&pri_resources=1, *Avocats sans frontières* <http://www.asf.be/action/publications/> and Human Rights Watch <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2011/05/31/justice-compromised-0>

2. Rwanda Correctional Service, Quarterly Report, Q2-FY 2013/2014, February 2014.

3. See Rwanda Correctional Service website <http://www.rcs.gov.rw/home/>

of thousands of men and women who still bear the scars of the darkest period in Rwanda's prisons ten or fifteen years ago. While many have since been released, their experiences remain unacknowledged and veiled in silence. Some, especially the younger ones, have succeeded in slotting back into family life, studies or employment, but others remain deeply affected by their experiences and the inability to talk openly about their time in prison.

Although all Rwandans know that many of those arrested for alleged participation in the genocide were innocent, these accusations still carry a stigma, and even prisoners who were released after being tried and acquitted have found it hard to shed the label of *génocidaire*. Despite developing such strong survival skills in prison, some of them seem strangely ill-equipped to deal with the real world after their release. In prison, once they had acclimatised to their shocking new surroundings, they had found their place and learnt to navigate the system. The outside world turned out to be harder to navigate, and critically, harder to control. It was a complex world, with many more variables, and the rules governing

social relations were less clearly defined. In addition, after years of incarceration, some prisoners found that their relationships with relatives and friends had altered, or broken down completely. Finally, the country had changed significantly in the time they had spent in prison.

Recovering from these experiences has been made harder by the fact that Rwandans have lived through so much horror and violence since 1994 that to most, the suffering of prisoners seems comparatively unimportant. As a result, it is simply ignored, and former prisoners have been left to deal with this painful period of their lives in solitude and in silence. Over the last ten years, releases, combined with various practical and organisational measures, have ensured that conditions for Rwandan prisoners have become more bearable. But nothing has been done to address the legacy of the earlier years, and the men and women who lived through them are still haunted by those memories. They have been left to fend for themselves, with no support and no recognition of the suffering they have endured.