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CATHOLIC CHURCH IN RWANDA APOLOGIZES FOR ROLE IN GENOCIDE

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Analyst (2015-2017)

The Rwandan genocide of 1994 is perhaps one of the darkest chapters in recent human history. Along with the Srebrenica Genocide, it is one of the two cases that were legally acknowledged as genocide by a competent international court. This genocide was the culmination of a decades-long ethnic conflict between the Tutsis and Hutus, resulting in the killings of more than 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus by Hutu extremists in the timespan of 100 days. This tragic event came to the spotlight recently when news broke about the Rwandan Catholic Churchs apology for its members' role in the systematic massacres that took place during the Rwandan Genocide.

On 20 November, the Catholic Church of Rwanda issued an apology that was contained in a joint communique signed by nine bishops constituting the Catholic Episcopal Conference of Rwanda. The apology was supposed to be read out in Catholic parishes across the country for the last day of the year of Jubilee of Gods Mercy that was declared by Pope Francis last year to promote reconciliation and mercy.

According to press reports, the apology partly reads as follows:[1]

> *We apologise for all the wrongs the Church committed. We apologise on behalf of all Christians for all forms of wrongs we committed. We regret that Church members violated (their) oath of allegiance to God's commandments.*
>
> *Even though the Church sent no body to do harm, we, the Catholic clerics in particular apologize, again, for some of the church members, clerics, people who dedicated themselves to serve God and Christians in general who played a role in the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi.*

It appears that this apology was made specifically in relation to the role of some Catholic Church members during the Rwandan Genocide. Apart from those who tried to make efforts to prevent the killings, some members of the Rwandan Catholic Church have been commonly accused for ignoring or facilitating the massacres. Some members of the Rwandan Catholic Church even actively participated in the massacres in different ways. Many horrible massacres were committed in churches and parishes where minority ethnic Tutsis who took shelter were hunted down by Hutu militias. One notorious case is the killing of 2,000 Tutsi refugees as a result of the destruction of a church with bulldozers by

order of Athanse Seromba, a Catholic priest.

Ultimately, many were tried by the UN International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), as well as local Rwandan courts. In fact, of the 93 individuals indicted by ICTR, four were Catholic priests;[2] among them, two were found guilty, including Seromba who was sentenced to life imprisonment.

Yet, this apology seems to be unsatisfying for many Rwandans as well as the Government of Rwanda.[3] In reaction to the apology by the Church, the Rwandan government issued the following statement:[4]

> *The Government of Rwanda notes the recent initiative of Rwandas nine Catholic bishops to apologize, in a general manner, for some of the acts committed by some members of the Catholic Church during the Genocide against the Tutsi.*
>
> *This step is welcome, as individual expressions of remorse. However, its profound inadequacy only serves to highlight how far the Catholic Church still remains from a full and honest reckoning with its moral and legal responsibilities.*
>
> *First, as they apologise on behalf of a few unnamed individuals, the bishops appear to take the extraordinary step of exonerating the Catholic Church as a whole for any culpability in connection with the Genocide. Everything in the historical record contradicts this divisive claim.*
>
> *Second, it is regrettable that some priests apparently declined to read the bishops message to parishioners as intended, thus disassociating themselves from even this mild expression of regret.*
>
> *Finally, given the scale of the crimes, there is ample justification for an apology from the Vatican, as has occurred repeatedly with other cases of lesser magnitude.*
>
> *The Government of Rwanda commends the bishops points on the importance of combatting genocide ideology, and will continue to engage in an open and frank dialogue with Church leaders with a view towards encouraging the Catholic Church to face up to its own past without excuses or fear, just as Rwandans themselves have been doing over the past twenty-two years.*

In parallel with the governments statement, many believe that the Church should have apologized not for the role of some of its members, but for its role as an institution. The Catholic Church of Rwanda is commonly blamed for its general inaction and omission during the massacres. It is commonly stated that the Catholic Church, given its very influential position in Rwanda at the time, could have had a preventive role with regards to the killings. It is even reported that many Tutsi survivors believe that the Church sided with the perpetrators of the massacres from the beginning at the very top of the Catholic hierarchy in Rwanda. For instance, Archbishop Vincent Nsengiyumva of Kigali, who was killed during the conflicts in Rwanda in 1994, is stated to have been within the inner-circle of the Hutus that eventually committed the massacres.[5] Yet, as stated in the statement by the government, the apology is seen by many an effort of exonerating the Catholic

Church as a whole for any culpability in connection with the Genocide. It is not seen as genuine and the fact that it was not read in all parishes enforces this assumption.

As implied in the Rwandan governments statement, the Holy See (the administrative center of the Roman Catholic Church located in Vatican City) is also subject to criticism with regard to its approach to the issue. The Holy See has been accused for years for being in denial of the Rwandan Catholic Churchs role in the massacres. It is stated that the Holy See paints the Roman Catholic Church as a victim of both the mass killings because priests and nuns were also among those slaughtered and of persecution by Rwandas current government, which has jailed members of the clergy and accused its leadership for complicity. Furthermore, there are also claims that the Roman Catholic Church and its members have helped some of the perpetrators of the genocide flee Rwanda to escape persecution or shielded them from extradition.[6]

Ultimately, many Rwandans have long called for the Holy See to apologize for the Rwandan Catholic Churchs role in the genocide and its aftermath. Many expect the Holy See to admit, at least, the Catholic Churchs sin of omission. The apology of the Catholic Church of Rwanda is undoubtedly a positive move. There is no doubt that it was made within the knowledge of the Vatican. Even so, apparently, the Vatican, in the eyes of many, continues to give the impression that it avoids the issue. Considering the fact that no pope has visited Rwanda since 1990,[7] what is clear is that Pope Francis should focus more on the Catholic Churchs role in the legally-established Rwandan Genocide of 1994, rather than diverting attention with unfounded allegations and accusations of genocide in the context of his remarks about the 1915 events.

**Photo: The New Times*

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