



This is the testimony of Thelma, a survivor of the Rwandan genocide

I live in Kigali, although I am not originally from here.

My father was a tailor and a businessman; he used to sell things he made. He had completed school and an apprenticeship as a tailor. He was 46 years old. My mother used to sell juice that she made herself. She did not have as good an education. She didn't even complete primary school. She was 38 years old. I had four siblings. Our family had an average standard of living. We lacked nothing. Now that is not the case. People like my grandfather (on my father's side) and my grandmother (on my mother's side) also used to help us; we would share our burden with them.

When Habyarimana died, people came to our house asking us if we knew why he had been killed. They had really just come with one intention - to rape my elder sister. They had grenades and many other weapons, which they soon threatened us with. They wanted to put my sister in one room, but we shouted at them. Then soldiers came and we managed to escape through the windows.

We returned and the next day it was broadcast on the radio that since the president had been killed by unknown people, people were advised not to venture out. Instead, they were to stay at home where they would be safest. On the road we could see people sharpening their machetes and chopping down trees and putting them across the road to serve as roadblocks. The national radio was broadcasting only religious music whereas the radio was calling people to wake up as the "enemy" was very near to them.

Soon after our house was attacked by two people. I know their names. They raped my sister and my mother. The last thing my parents said to us was not to try and flee since it was useless. But we didn't follow their advice and my brother and I escaped through the windows. The others stayed at home, and were killed.

That day passed but they came back again the next day. When we saw them coming, we fled to take refuge in our neighbours' home. Later on we decided that it would be safer to go hide in a church. Our parents were not able to escape as easily we did. They were taken. We were told later on by a neighbour how they were killed.

On our way to church, we had to pass many roadblocks. We managed to lie in order to get through. At one roadblock, *interahamwe* were busy killing and raping women. By luck, we managed to slip through and reached the church. We begged the Priest to let us in but he refused, saying that there were already too many people inside. We camped with many other refugees outside the church. *Interahamwe* raped me and other women. They took our clothes off and shared us between themselves.

Priests eventually let us into the church compound. But life there was not easy. There were children who were brought there, but had no parents. Others who were sick were brought there as well, and because they had no one to take care for them many just died. Every day the killers would return to take people elsewhere where they were killed. They also took away women to rape. The lucky ones would be returned, but many were raped and then killed.

At times I wished I had listened to my parents, when they told us to stay in one place. The moment we were saved can be described only as good. Our rescuers kept some of us in the church, while others were taken to a village. When there were no more killers in the area, they let us return to our homes.

Today's Reading of the Testimonies marks the 15th Anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, in support of survivors like Thelma.