

Press Association

July 16, 2004, Friday

DAY-LONG TRIBUTE TO VICTIMS OF RWANDAN GENOCIDE

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SECTION: HOME NEWS

LENGTH: 574 words

Actress Helen Baxendale and TV presenter Gaby Roslin are among the women set to pay an emotional tribute today to mark the anniversary of the end of the 100-day Rwandan genocide.

They will join the Rwandan Ambassador to the UK, Rosemary Museminali, and a host of women, including singers Kym Mazelle and Beverly Knight and journalist Polly Toynbee, in an all-day "Reading of the Testimonies" in Trafalgar Square in London.

Hundreds of thousands of Rwandans - mostly minority Tutsis - were slaughtered in the 100-day genocide orchestrated by a regime run by extremists from the Hutu majority.

Women aged from 17 to 76 will mark the 10th anniversary of the end of the massacre at the event organised by SURF, the Rwandan Survivors' Fund.

The survivors' testimonies highlight the stories of some of the 25,000 women and girls who were raped and deliberately infected by HIV-positive men in 1994.

In addition to the readings there will be short talks by male supporters of SURF, including Red Dwarf's Danny John-Jules and Babyfather actor David Harewood, as well as live African music.

Survivors' Fund director Mary Kayitesi Blewitt, who founded SURF after losing 50 members of her family in Rwanda, said: "This Reading of the Testimonies is hugely important as it will demonstrate that the people of the UK not only remember the one million Rwandans who died in 1994, but that they care about those still living with the legacy of the genocide."

The event aims not only to raise awareness of the plight of women in Rwanda today but will also focus attention on SURF's initiative for free antiretroviral treatment for women survivors.

Lindsey Hilsum, international editor of Channel 4 News, was the only British journalist in Kigali when the genocide began, and she is scheduled to read at 2pm.

She said: "People think the Rwandan genocide is over, that it ended ten years ago. It didn't.

"Women are dying of the genocide today, because they were gang-raped in 1994 and are now living with HIV and AIDS.

"I hope the Reading of the Testimonies will bring the stories of these women to more members of the public, so people can know that it's possible to save some of these women by getting them life-saving antiretroviral drugs."

And actress Josie D'Arby, who plans to speak at 8.30am, played a Rwandan refugee in a play two years ago and met victims as part of her research.

She said: "Remembering Rwanda is an important initiative for reminding governments and pharmaceutical companies that the world is watching how they treat its afflicted and waiting for them to do something monumental and inspirational."

As part of the campaign a 1,500-strong petition will be submitted to Downing Street at the end of the Reading of the Testimonies.

An Early Day Motion has also been tabled by SURF patron Brian Cotter MP and has received cross-party support from more than 100 MPs.

A spokeswoman for SURF said: "Both the petition and the EDM call for the British Government to increase pressure on the international community to do more to prioritise and fund medical treatment for this critically important group of women who are now HIV positive.

"Presently many receive no medication, no shelter, and must cope with the trauma of being raped and the stigma of being HIV positive without support.

"These women are often the sole survivors of their entire families - many with responsibility for supporting orphaned children."