



Rwanda

Victims “confront their suffering” 25 years after the genocide

Montreal, 7 April 2019. Today Rwandans will begin commemorating the Tutsi genocide, in which more than 800,000 people died in 1994. Twenty-five years on, one in three people still suffer post-traumatic stress disorder¹. HI continues to assist the victims of this violence. As part of its response, launched in the aftermath of the genocide, it has already provided psychosocial support to more than 25,000 people.

Over a period of one hundred days, starting in April 1994, more than 800,000 people - men, women and children - were killed in Rwanda. Many others were beaten and tortured. This senseless violence left deep scars that are yet to heal, twenty-five years later. Nearly 29% of people - one third of the population - who lived through the genocide continue to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. More than one in five people suffer bouts of depression.

HI will be working with mental health professionals, including psychologists, in conjunction with the National Mental Health Coordination Committee (Rwanda Biomedical Center - RBC) during the three-month commemoration period. The organisation will prepare them to manage trauma crises and assist genocide victims at memorial sites.

Breaking the vicious cycle of violence

“From day to day, people tend to bury and repress genocide-related trauma,” explains Chantal Umurungi, coordinator of HI’s mental health projects in Rwanda. “During the commemoration period, memories, feelings and emotions will return to the surface. The victims will be ‘confronted with their suffering’. People will talk about it and it’s going to be very powerful. They may relive panic attacks, the loss of loved ones and so on. The after-effects are still being felt today. It’s essential people support each other through this time of suffering, and it is very liberating to share feelings.”

HI will also address the indirect consequences of the genocide: “Its impact on mental health has given rise to other indirect consequences such as drug use, high-risk sexual practices, violence, and marital conflicts. This impoverishes families and weakens social ties. By proposing this approach to community mental health, by allowing people to share their feelings, and by rebuilding bridges, HI wants to break the vicious cycle of violence and poorer mental health,” adds Chantal Umurungi.

More than 25 000 victims supported

HI launched its response in the aftermath of the Tutsi genocide in 1994 and implemented its first mental health project in 1996, providing psychological support to children who had lost their parents. Today, HI still supports direct and indirect victims of the genocide. Since 1996, the organisation has

¹(Munyandamutsa, Nkubamugisha, Gex- Fabry, & Eytan, 2012)



implemented more than 46,000 psychosocial support sessions for more than 25,000 direct victims of violence.

Community mental health approach

In 2018, more than 5,800 people took part in psychosocial activities to overcome their trauma, including in Kigali (Gasabo district) and Ouest Province (Rutsiro and Rubavu district). Under its community mental health approach, HI organises listening and discussion groups where people can express themselves and talk about their trauma, in the company of a psychologist or a community volunteer. Self-help groups also enable them to set up collective business projects, such as livestock breeding and small shops, in order to enhance their self-reliance and self-confidence.

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About HI

HI is an independent international aid organisation. It has been working in situations of poverty and exclusion, conflict and disaster for 35 years. Working alongside people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups, our action and testimony are focused on responding to their essential needs, improving their living conditions, and promoting respect for their dignity and basic rights. Since it was founded in 1982, HI has set up development programmes in more than 60 countries and intervenes in numerous emergency situations. The network of eight national associations (Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States) works constantly to mobilise resources, jointly manage projects and to increase the impact of the organisation's principles and actions. HI is one of six founding organisations of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), co-winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997 and winner of the Conrad N. Hilton Award in 2011. HI takes action and campaigns in places where "living in dignity" is no easy task.