



**West End Refugee Service**  
*strength through support*



[wers.org.uk](http://wers.org.uk)

Registered Charity No 1077601

## Why I won't forget

**This is an article by Louella Houldcroft that appeared in the Journal in 2004.**

Musa Hassan Ali was just 10 years old when he and his parents fled their home in Rwanda to seek sanctuary on the Congo border:



Ali and his wife Innocente

It was 1975 and ethnic tensions between the Hutu and the Tutsi were once again inflamed, leaving many thousands of innocent people in fear of their lives.

And it was 11 years before the family found the courage to return, reassured by promises of peace and a widespread belief that the problems of the past were now behind them. Nothing could have prepared them for the horrors that were still to come. A decade later; instead of enjoying peace and reconciliation, Ali, as he is known, and his family found themselves in the middle of the worst genocide of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In just 100 days, an estimated one million people were murdered. At the peak of the horror, people were being killed at a rate five times faster than that of the Nazi death camps.

Losing 13 members of his family, including his parents, Ali survived and eventually fled with his wife and children to seek asylum in the UK. Now living in Newcastle and working for the West End Refugee Service as a support worker, Ali says the nightmares are still with him.

'Every single day I remember that terrible time,' says Ali, who lives with wife Innocente and his children. 'I remember the family I lost, the family I left behind and the terrible memories of what I saw.' 'It is unimaginable this should have happened just 10 years ago and it is so important that we never let it happen again. We must learn our lessons from all those lives that were lost.' Like most Rwandans, Ali says his life has been moulded by his 'identity'. Born to a father that was Tutsi and a mother who was Hutu, Ali had a mixed heritage but was labelled a Tutsi by the authorities. When he and his family returned to Rwanda in

1986 following their exile in Goma on the Congo border, Ali says it was a country where discrimination was commonplace and opportunities for the Tutsi people hugely limited.

'We were told things were peaceful but when we returned the reality was very different. The killings were not so evident but the Tutsi were not given the opportunity to study; places at university were limited and we were sent to work on the land.'

In the early 1980s and 1990s high unemployment and corruption in the government inflamed ethnic tensions and the country was bracing itself for a renewal of violence. On April 6 1994, a plane carrying Rwandan president Juvenal Habyarimana, a member of the the majority Hutu ethnic group, was shot down.

Ali recalls: 'It was all planned down to the last detail – they were all there waiting to do the killings and there was nothing we could do. No-one in the population knew what was going on but they had already identified people, they knew where to find them and they had escape routes blocked.' 'It happened so quickly and there was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. Everywhere you saw bodies, people decapitated and without limbs – hacked to death. I can't find the words to describe it. I don't think it's possible to understand unless you were there.'

In 3 months about 1 million people were butchered – a scale not matched since the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to end the Second World War. In parts of Rwanda, the militias called the killings 'communal work', dismembering people all day or until they were exhausted, cutting the Achilles tendons of survivors so they could not run away. In the morning they would return to finish the job. Ali explains: 'You had no choice but to try to help yourself. Families were split up and no-one knew who was alive or who was dead. I was trying to find an escape route with one of my nephews when I had my lucky chance and met a priest on the road who literally saved our lives.'

Ali and the boy were taken to a hide-out with 11 other survivors and stayed there for the next 19 days. Eventually the priest managed to smuggle them out to a place of safety and they remained there until the end of the atrocities, not knowing how many – if any – of their family had survived. Travelling to Goma, where he found a surviving brother and sister, Ali says they then returned to Rwanda. 'Many people fled to Goma and so there was overcrowding and spread of disease,' he says. 'I returned home to find 13 members of my family dead, and my parents. It was only later that we found out how they had died and it's something that I still cannot bear talking about. It is a time I try not to remember.'

For the next few years, Ali and his family stayed in Rwanda and tried to rebuild their lives. But in 2001 he was woken in the dead of night by soldiers who broke into his home, took his papers, and arrested him. He was put in prison and accused of plotting to overthrow the Rwandan government.

'The day before I was arrested I had paid a visit to my uncle who is the former president of Rwanda. The authorities were convinced we were conspiring against the government and interrogated me for 2 months.' 'I was badly beaten and my feet were paralysed, but I wouldn't admit to something that wasn't true.' One night in February 2002, Ali was woken in his cell by a soldier. 'I was convinced that I was going to be killed and begged for my life. The soldier led me to a car. As we drove there were gunshots all around, but the people in the car, strangers, told me I was safe now. They told me to leave the country.'

Ali crossed the border into Uganda and in April 2002 came to the UK to claim asylum.

'More could have been done and should have been done to stop so many innocent people being killed. It is incomprehensible something like this should have happened and we must never allow it to happen again. The world turned a blind eye then. The dangers and possibilities were always there but no-one believed it would happen or that it would happen so fast. Nearly one million people died. We must never forget them and must learn lessons from what happened. This is the 21<sup>st</sup> century – we cannot let it happen again.'