

## 'Lest we forget' the Rwandan genocide

Contributed by Hilton Yip, Senior Staff Writer  
Wednesday, 16 January 2008

Conference seeks to answer the question 'why';

A series of speakers have been invited to York University's Keele Campus as part of the 'Lest we forget: Conference on Rwanda Genocide,' a symposium that is intended to educate and inform.

The conference, which is occurring in 152 Founders College, began on Jan. 14 and will run until Jan. 17.

It is intended to teach people about the causes of the genocide, as well as the lessons that can prevent similar occurrences in the future. There is a different theme for each day of the conference, ranging from the colonial history of Rwanda to post-conflict reconciliation and the healing process.

On its first day, the Rwandan ambassador to Canada, Edda Mukabagwiza, gave a speech that was followed by personal testimonies and songs. Speeches were also given by the co-ordinator of York's international development studies (IDS) program, Mario Blaser; the associate vice-president international, Adrian Schubert; and the president of the IDS Students' Association, Chris Luna.

Tuesday's session featured testimonials by artist Rupert Bazambanza and professor Egide Karuranga. Both were genocide survivors and spoke about their experiences.

While Bazambanza's testimonial was mostly personal, Karuranga talked about several aspects of the genocide, including events in post-colonial Rwandan history leading up to it.

The main idea for the conference came from Ruth Kambali, the conference organizer and a fourth-year nursing student who was born in Rwanda. She said there were several things that inspired her.

'I had so many questions like, why the genocide happened [and] why so many people had to die. In doing so I realized we can't live that way for long, we need to move on,' Kambali said.

'What can we do especially to prevent that so it won't happen again. Also, how do you heal so you can go on for tomorrow?'

'Of course we realize there is another genocide happening in Darfur, so that brings back bad memories,' she continued.

Besides providing education and reflection, the conference aims to confront genocide revisionists.

'[The conference also seeks] to prevent ideology of revisionists who deny that the genocide happened,' said Kambali.

The conference will continue Wednesday when speakers will discuss the challenges and obstacles of reconciliation and justice. It will feature scholar Gerald Caplan, author Barbara Coloroso and Fatuma Ndangiza, the executive secretary of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission in Rwanda. The final day will focus on the process of healing through grassroots community and international participation and the socio-psychological challenges.

### Some facts on the Rwandan genocide

The Rwanda genocide occurred in 1994 when at least 800,000, mostly Tutsi Rwandans were killed over a span of roughly 100 days in a deliberate campaign by Hutu extremists. These extremists were able to convince many of their fellow Hutus to participate in these killings. At the time, the Tutsis were the minority ethnic group while the Hutus were the majority.

Rwanda's Belgian colonizers, who used physical body and face characteristics to classify the two groups, manipulated these ethnic differences. The Belgians favored the Tutsis as the ruling group, which in turn fostered resentment and increased tensions with the Hutus.

Considered one of the worst tragedies in the post-Second World War era, the genocide was largely ignored by much of the western world's media and governments.

Today, many people feel that this is being played out in Darfur, Sudan, where an ongoing genocide has been met with hesitation and foot-dragging by western countries. There are several factors that hinder international intervention, like the Sudanese government's refusal to acknowledge genocide and to allow western forces to intervene.

This tragedy has a special significance for Canada as Canadian Gen. Romeo Dallaire served as the head of the UN peacekeeping force stationed in Rwanda at that time. Dallaire's small UN force was helpless to stop the genocide and, despite his pleas, reinforcements from the West and the UN were not sent.