

Remarks by Mrs. Jeannette Kagame
National Prayer Breakfast side luncheon
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Washington D.C. USA

Dear Sisters,

Good afternoon to you all,

Let me begin by saying that I am very happy to be with you today, and blessed by the opportunity to share a little of Rwanda's ongoing journey of unity, reconciliation, promise, and progress.

I was looking around me in this beautiful room, and I recognized some of the many friendly faces that have visited Rwanda. They will certainly agree that Rwandans today see themselves not merely as survivors nor victims or even perpetrators of history; but as full participants in our shared destiny, with their eyes resolutely fixed on the future, and their hearts full of aspirations to reach as high as they can. To be the best they can be.

My country is mostly known for its tragic past; however, more and more of my countrymen and women believe that they will soon be seen not through the prism of chaos and sorrow, but by that of hope;

by the resilience, resourcefulness and optimism the people and leadership of Rwanda have displayed, in response to what seemed to be insurmountable odds.

Bishop John Rucyahana, the head of Rwanda's National Unity and Reconciliation Commission once said that "if you hold a glass of water about 3 feet off the ground and drop it, it will surely break, but in fewer and larger pieces; but if you drop it from above your head, there will be more and smaller pieces. They will be harder to pick and re-assemble." Indeed, Rwanda fell from above and shattered into a million pieces.

The Rwandan Genocide against the Tutsi, was the result of a leadership that amplified differences between its people; thus, creating a painfully divided society. The leadership at every level, all institutions, the church, the state, families, friends, neighbors let go of their humanity and sanity; it was as if the devil had descended upon Rwanda.

Needless to say, it left the country in ruins in every imaginable sense. How could the people of Rwanda -- indeed any people -- possibly meet the challenge of healing, re-uniting, re-building and unifying a completely shattered society? This much we knew: divided, we could not be equal; divided, we could not be strong.

Between 250,000 and 500,000 women were raped during the genocide, 20,000 were born out of these rapes; 50,000 widows, 75,000 orphans¹, 2 million refugees and about 650,000 internally displaced persons². But, even amidst the agonizing torment the people of Rwanda faced, they continued to feel the presence of God - - and they held fast to their faith in God.

Despite the fact that they were killed even in places of worship, Christians continued to flock the churches – I suppose this is the mystery of faith and belief in a higher power. Just as remarkably, they kept their faith in humanity.

¹ <http://survivors-fund.org.uk/resources/rwandan-history/statistics/>

² <http://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/Rwanda>

As we in Rwanda, reflect on our society, culture, values, and common history, a question keeps coming up: are these 'so-called' differences that destroyed us even real? There is a saying in Kinyarwanda that goes 'icyo dupfana kiruta icyo dufpa' loosely meaning that what unites us is greater than that which divides us.

Rather than looking to our differences, which may not even be authentic, post-genocide Rwandans learned to look at the bigger picture; to look at what we could do collectively to benefit our society. My dear sisters, we decided to unite ourselves around tackling problems like disease, poverty and illiteracy. We fought and won battle after battle against these common problems. The progress achieved in Rwanda towards unity, stability and prosperity took the audacity of a fearless, yet visionary leadership.

Let me stress that this would not have been possible without transformational leadership at all levels of Rwandan society; a new kind of leadership that inspired us to seek what binds us and to strive for a common purpose. Our leaders set the bar high; survivors were

expected to reach deep within their hearts and find it in themselves to forgive the perpetrators' and not seek revenge. They had to trust that the government had their best interest at heart. Perpetrators on the other hand were given fair and speedy trials and a chance to confess and own up to their roles in the genocide.

Our resolve to take the route less travelled was one that took strength and discernment. It took the inner belief that we knew best what was good and necessary for ourselves, and that God was with us.

The government certainly took primary responsibility by developing programs aimed at reconciliation, but no policy had the slightest hope of succeeding without the active and impassioned participation of the people themselves, millions of whom poured back over the border from neighboring countries and all over the world, including the US, to play their part in rebuilding their nation.

Women, too, played a key role in Rwanda's reconciliation process. As mothers and life-givers, it is in our nature to protect and keep society united, through our families. In difficult and desperate situations, a woman's instinct kicks in and she fights for her own.

According to researchers "when women decision-makers are present in critical mass (around 30 percent) they build bridges across political and ethnic divides; provide fresh ideas and perspectives; shift budgets away from guns to education, health, and environment; create a more civil political sphere".³ Indeed, empowered Rwandan women in leadership positions continue to participate in unity and reconciliation efforts.

I ask all of us today to pray for God to grant us the strength, give us the hearts and minds of true leaders, the spirit of discernment and the compassion we need to do what is right and serve our people. Let us challenge ourselves to be a voice of unity and reconciliation.

Thank you for your attention.

³ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/swanee-hunt/george-marshall-hillary-clinton_b_2585790.html