



Rwanda's killers and victims shown at Cannes

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CANNES, France (AFP) — Shot over a decade in a lush hillside corner of Rwanda, Cannes movie "My Neighbor My Killer" looks at whether victims and perpetrators of a mass atrocity can ever learn to live together again.

"What would you say if you were asked to embrace people who decimated your family?" said director Anne Aghion, whose movie screens Thursday out of competition at Cannes.

Its release comes 15 years after the 1994 slaughter of 800,000 people in the space of a few months.

The US-based film-maker originally set out in 2001 to document Rwanda's efforts to bring justice and reconciliation through local tribunals known as "gacaca" trials.

But the process, involving 11,000 community courts and deep human wounds, took longer than Aghion expected, finally involving dozens of trips and producing 350 hours of film.

Translations from the Kinyarwanda language alone took nearly two years.

Through the decade she travelled over and over again to remote hillside Gafumba, focusing specially on two survivors, Felicite Nyirasangwa and Euphrasie Mukarwemera, both aging Hutu widows of Tutsi husbands, whose children were considered Tutsis.

"I am closed in now, not alive, not dead," says Felicite, adding that she trembles uncontrollably each time she remembers the sound of the knives.

Euphrasie says she can "still feel my baby when they pulled it off my back and beat him to death before cutting him up."

Both the old women reflect on their solitude, on having to live alone and look after other people's children.

Avoiding the use of archive footage, based solely on interviews and events in the village, the movie traces the progress of the "gacaca" trials -- a local word

meaning justice on the grass -- as the prisoners arrive, are accused and argue their case.

The system encouraged genocide suspects to confess their crimes and make apologies in exchange for reduced sentences, with the perpetrators of the 1994 atrocity then returning to live side by side with survivors.

"I'm interested in how people live together in extreme situations," said Aghion, comparing the difficulty of reconciliation in Rwanda with Cambodia, Bosnia or Darfur. "I wanted to see how neighbours live together again after a cataclysm."

"There is some level of normalcy and coexistence now," she said. "But you have to imagine how hard it is in these hills where the fields are tiny and people work all day alongside others who killed their families."

Did she believe the trials had been fruitful in dampening hatred after the genocide? "There's a combination of resignation, fear and hope, conflicting emotions.

"After working on this film for almost 10 years I still don't know whether the 'gacaca' courts worked. There is more peace, but is it due to the tribunals or just to the passing of time?"

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