

Rwanda



The Republic of Rwanda is a land-locked country in central Africa., just south of the equator. Of the 54 countries on the African continent, Rwanda is one of the smallest and most densely populated. It is slightly smaller in area than Massachusetts with double its population. population is roughly the same as well. The capital city is Kigali.



Rwandan countryside shows beautiful farms tucked into mountains

Most people who live in Rwanda are Christian. (about 93%). Those who say they are Christians are about evenly split between the Roman Catholic faith and various Protestants sects. Only about 2% of Rwandans are Muslim; the rest of the population either follow traditional African religion or say they have none at all.

Although education is free and compulsory in Rwanda up to 11th grade, only about 73% of Rwandans can read and write.

Health care is also a problem for the average Rwanda, although in recent years there have been improvements. There is about one doctor for every 7,000 people in the country. Malaria remains a huge problem, although recently infant malarial mortality rates are dropping. Ten percent of children under five years old are underweight.

Visitors to Rwanda must be sure that they are vaccinated against yellow fever as well as take medicine to prevent malarial infection. Rwanda has had its share of social upheaval, most especially in 1994 when the plane of the president of the country was shot down over the Kigali airport and he was killed. This sparked unspeakable violence called a genocide—when a huge number of people are killed just because they belong to one race, religion, or creed.

In Rwanda, the long-running ethnic tensions between the Hutus and the Tutsis erupted. Although no one is sure who shot down the

MCA in Rwanda

Hutu-majority president's plane, within hours of his death, extreme Hutus began setting up roadblocks, trapping Tutsis and killing them for no reason other than their ethnicity. Neighbor turned against neighbor, co-worker against co-worker.

This horror enveloped the country for 100 days and it is estimated that over 800,000 people were killed.

During this time, many Rwandans also acted as heroes and hid people—some neighbors, some people they had never met—and fed and sheltered them at risk to their own lives. A powerful book for older students to read on the subject is called *Left to Tell—Discovering God in the Rwandan Holocaust* by Imaculee Ilibagiza. In it, she details how she was hidden in a small bathroom for 91 days with seven other woman by a Lutheran pastor. A devout Catholic, Ilibagiza details her own faith journey during this horrific time and how praying the rosary played a big part in her mental survival.



Rwanda is not only famous for its Genocide—it is also the site of a Marian Apparition. Beginning in 1981, in the small village of Kibeho, in the Diocese of Gikongoro, the Blessed Mother appeared to three young people (ages 17, 20, and 21). Mary identified herself as The Mother of the Word. She asked the three young adults to tell people to pray to prevent a terrible war and showed them visions of their country descending into violence. In 1990, Saint Pope John Paul II encouraged the faithful to turn to Mary as a “simple and sure guide” to help them overcome their political and ethnic divisions. The warning went unheeded. During the Genocide, two

massacres occurred at Kibeho itself—one taking the life of over 5,000 people, including one of the young people to whom the Blessed Mother had appeared.

More than twenty years later, Rwandans are working at following a path of reconciliation and peace. According to the organization Human Rights Watch, a large number of the people in command at the time of the mass killings have been brought to justice. Many of the lower level perpetrators have been tried in community courts called *Gacaca*, which were set up to help bring about reconciliation between groups locally. The results of these courts were mixed, with some real peace achieved while in other places, combatants escaped punishment.

In the Diocese of Gikongoro, where the Blessed Mother appeared, The Missionary Childhood Association (MCA) has been helping to fund “Peace Training” for the children of the area. Children are also using their God-given talents to raise funds for their



Gikongoro MCA Members at Peace Training

brothers and sisters in the missions around the world. Because they are very poor, they have no funds to offer themselves, so they applied to MCA's General Fund for help. They are forming groups of 30-40 children, called tontines. The first segment of the group, with help from MCA, will receive a small animal—some chickens or rabbits—to breed. Once these animals have babies, other children will receive their own animal. This will continue until each child has an animal. The children will learn responsibility, how to care for their animal, and, importantly to their faith, how to be patient and to share with others. When all the animals have been bred and multiply, they will be sold at market. Proceeds will benefit MCA—and all the children of the world!