

# Revival

## Rwanda Peace Marathon. 15 May 2005

By Darius Kenyatta Ellis

Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation. These words adorn the streets in villages, towns and cities throughout Rwanda. They appear in the press and on placards, written in Kinyarwanda, the shared language of Hutus and Tutsis. The aim is to promote peace and community amidst the lingering effects of the 1994 genocide. The Rwanda Peace Marathon is part of this attempt to come to terms.

This troubled nation stands at the dawn of a new era. Stability and growth are real possibilities. It is a poignant but hopeful place to visit and the Kigali International Marathon is a race to run - and to remember.

From Nairobi, I went to Kigali to visit colleagues and to participate in the first international marathon to be held in Rwanda. Sponsored by the Ministry of Sport and the Soroptimists International, this well-organised run started and finished in the "Peace Stadium."

Rwanda is known as the country of a thousand hills, and as soon as you leave the airport a spectacular landscape unrolls. The combination of the hills and the altitude presents a physical challenge for visitors, but I thought that the cultural challenge would be equally demanding. I have lived in East Africa for almost three years, and I was keen to run this pioneering marathon. I arrived a few days before the race to learn more about the country, to run on the streets and to get used to the locality.

It was a chance to observe firsthand how this tiny, diverse and fascinating country and people were confronting their many challenges. The path to internal peace and stability will take decades. I did three 10km runs in different parts of the city, on well-paved and safe streets. Onlookers cried, "Courage, courage", meaning: be courageous, be strong. This was helpful. I just knew from those initial days of running that the local population would receive all runners uproariously well on race day.

They had respect and admiration in their eyes - generous qualities. I ran with a hydration system on my back and stopped at a petrol station mini-market for fluid. When I opened the bottles and poured the contents into the backpack it startled all those who observed. Even when you might expect that they would be disconcerted, the locals showed palpable warmth.

The race organisers had



scheduled a 5km Fun Run, which drew the largest turnout, at 8:00. The half-marathon followed and then came the intrepid few dozen that ran the marathon. We started just a half an hour later than scheduled. At the starting line half a dozen traditional drummers beat out rhythms to urge the runners on.

Initially I thought: what a drag to run the same lap course four times. But confining the course to a shorter lap meant we could avoid slopes as fearsome as rift valley escarpments. Living in Nairobi these past years gave me a slight altitude advantage, but the daunting hills more than discounted it.

All of us marathoners felt we were part of something special. A dozen other European and Asian races were on offer this weekend. We chose here, and were rewarded. We nodded to each other in camaraderie as we struggled up and down the hills. At 41km, with sunburned shoulders and sensing another marathon finish, the euphoria was overwhelming.

Cheers and applause from the locals underscored their pleasure and sense of pride that Kigali could now be included in the international community of organized marathons. After the race local teenagers told me they felt proud that Kigali was hosting a big race, after seeing so many of their fellow Africans run in

televised races throughout Europe and America. They had seen how communities come out in support of all runners, and they did the same. The marathon banners, with the AIMS logo adjacent to that of the Kigali International Marathon, said it all.

One guy approached me to explain, in excellent Kiswahili, that just eleven years ago these streets were full of hatred and blood. Now, hosting runners from neighboring countries and from around the world, the race was symbolic of Rwanda's "revival."

On 6 April 1994 a missile fired on an aircraft carrying Rwandan President Habyarimana and Burundian President Ntaryamira as it was approaching Kigali airport crashed and killed all occupants. That incident unleashed a 100-day wave of violence in which a million ethnic Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed at the hands of the military and Interahamwe militias. Both Presidents were returning from power sharing talks in Arusha, Tanzania with the rival Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front.

To this day, no one knows who fired the missile. Some suggest it came from the Hutu-controlled military base near the airport on the orders of fellow Hutu commanders dissatisfied with President Habyarimana's participation in a peaceful resolution of the conflict. What followed was a complete

failure of the international community to stem the genocide. Pogroms against the Tutsis had been organized in 1959, 1963, 1967, and 1973 but on nothing like the scale as happened between April-July 1994.

All runners coming to the race next year should not only visit the Genocide Memorials in Kigali and Gikongoro, but also the Catholic Church at Ntarama where 5000 men, women and children were slaughtered. The remaining stench still evokes the horrors that occurred here and that all of us must never forget.

The marathon can bring other benefits. If the Ministry of Sport and others can continue to encourage local runners with races and organized events, Rwanda would surely produce some world-class athletes, like those from Ethiopia and Kenya. They have the altitude advantage and anyone who trains on these hills would have an enormous advantage when the time came to race in Chicago, Rotterdam or Mumbai.

I've run marathons in Bangkok, Dubai, Athens, Berlin, Cape Town and Florence, to name a few. The Kigali Marathon is one to which I would return, and I would encourage my fellow runners to come to Rwanda and run this wonderful race. Participation makes a small contribution to a fledgling economy. Your money will be well spent.

For yourself, you will see sights that should remind all of us to never forget what happened in Rwanda in 1994. And other things. Just days after the race, I spent an hour only metres away from a group of 16 Gorillas in the Volcanoes National Park. Despite all that went before, Rwanda offers an enchanting experience. You should add the Kigali International Marathon to your list of personal bests.

### Result

#### MEN:

1	Joseph NSUBUGA	UGA	2:28:23
2	Joseph RUTTO	KEN	2:28:40
3	Alex SANKA	TAN	2:33:26
4	Francis YIGA	UGA	2:33:41
5	Yiga NEKEMEYA	UGA	2:33:51
6	Ronald LANGAT	KEN	2:39:21
7	Zubel NSENGIYUMVA	RWA	2:42:59
8	Freddy TWAHIRWA	RWA	2:43:35
9	Kenneth KOSGAI	KEN	2:44:17
10	Pacifique AYUBUSA	RWA	2:45:16

#### WOMEN:

1	Margaret NAKINDU	UGA	3:18:06
2	Rannveig ODDSDOTTIR	ISL	3:20:41
3	Epiphane NYIRABARAME	RWA	3:21:40
4	Mediatrice NYIRARANGWA	RWA	3:23:18
5	Brundis ERNSTDOTTIR	ISL	3:25:10
6	Marie-Jeanne NYIRAHABIMANA	RWA	3:25:47
7	Fatuma IDDI	TAN	3:35:10
8	Bjorg Helga OLAFSDOTTIR	ISL	4:17:05
9	Monique MUHLEN	LUX	4:32:17
10	Christina VAN HOORDE	BEL	4:33:32

#### HALF MARATHON:

##### MEN:

1	Sammy KOSGEI	UGA	1:07:42
2	Safari RACHIDI	RWA	1:08:03
3	Simukeka JEAN BAPTISTE	RWA	1:08:15

##### WOMEN

1	Pelagie MUSENGIMANA	RWA	1:20:50
2	Angelique NYIRANSAMBIMANA	RWA	1:22:32
3	Susan J TEIMET	KEN	1:24:46

