

PHOTO ESSAY

GOMMA

A WAR ROOKIE ON THE DEATH BEAT



A Swedish TV crew films at the Kabumba refugee camp.

PHOTOGRAPHS & TEXT BY RUSSELL MONK

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An International Red Cross worker holds a baby girl found among 80 Rwandan refugees trampled to death in Zaire.

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Panicked people were fleeing into the countryside of bordering nations and into foreign towns



Volunteers toss one of the victims of disease and starvation into a mass grave.

“**O**H, you were in Kigali recently,” a British cameraman said, as we sat in the press compound at Goma airport in Zaire, a flood of refugees streaming past us. “Well, you must have met Alex?” As it turned out he was right. I had met Alex (I had smelled him first), although when I stumbled across what was left of his corpse — a truncated pair of legs in tattered jeans — I little suspected that within days he would be the topic of conversation. *(To Page 6)*

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Smoke from hundreds of fires casts a haze over the setting sun at the Kabumba refugee camp, just outside Goma.

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“I could see dozens and dozens of bodies ... I could describe what they looked like, but I don't think you want to know what a little girl resembles after she has been hit by mortar fire”



Tutsi boy left orphaned by the Rwandan war lies in a makeshift hospital in Kigali.

(From page 3) It turns out that Alex had been lying in a shallow hole in the ground for weeks, maybe longer, and there he stayed after I left. United Nations peacekeepers had decided he at least deserved a name. Why Alex? Nobody could say. He was the first corpse I had ever seen up close. There would be many more in the days ahead.

I am a London-born, freelance photographer who lives in Toronto and have worked on a grab-bag of editorial and commercial assignments: a feature on Cuban music, annual reports and portraits in Canada and the U.S., jobs in Mexico and all over Central and South America. In the course of my work, I had never covered a war but I had observed poverty, withered limbs, sick teen-agers. What I had not seen was the sheer unrelenting river of death that is Rwanda. Panicked people were fleeing into the countryside of bordering nations and into foreign towns, hounded to death as they went by mortar shells, machetes and cholera.

The town of Goma lies on the border, in Zaire. It stands in the shadow of the active Nyiragongo volcano and is where Zairean President Mobutu Sese Seko keeps a palatial summer home. Most of its 200,000 residents live in sub-

standard conditions, and could well do without the million or so refugees who have suddenly appeared in their midst.

It was on a Goma street that I got my first close look at multiple deaths. The body count was over 80, mostly women and children. There they lay, trampled to death, heads crushed like watermelons, bones and joints contorted and askew, their faces locked in that dreadful grimace of sudden and violent death. Children screamed as they sat amid the bodies of their dead mothers.

It was my first morning in the town, and I stood and stared. I remember thinking what a cruel twist of fate. Some of these people must have walked hundreds of kilometers to reach a safe haven, only to die like this, trampled to death by their own countrymen as the mortar fire fell.

More refugees passed the scene, almost all carrying something on their heads: a threadbare mattress, bits of foam, suitcases, jerry cans. Some of them bent to sift through the debris.

As I brought the camera to my face the crowd looked at me. I felt so conspicuous. Mozoongoo (white man), photographer, Mozoongoo, photographer, they said. It was mur-

mured like a mantra, a touch of scorn to it perhaps. To them I was only a white guy with a camera and I held not the slightest significance for them.

That night I lay in my hotel bed and listened to the sporadic sound of AK-47s chattering in the night. It was probably the drunken revelry of local Zairian soldiers shooting off the guns confiscated from the fleeing Hutu army. Then suddenly there was a nearby whoomp of mortar fire. Again and again. I hunched up in bed pulling the sheet to my face.

The next morning I walked less than a kilometer down to the border, away from the dead women and children on the street. Human columns were still streaming through the border. To one side I saw what I thought was a rubbish heap. When my eyes focused through the acrid haze caused by dust and wood smoke, I realized what had happened. The mortar fire I had heard had landed in the midst of people walking through the night, and I could see bodies, dozens and dozens of bodies, maybe hundreds. I could describe what they looked like but I don't think you want to know what a little girl resembles after she has been hit by mortar fire.

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A young girl sprawls across the corpse of her mother at the Miningi cholera camp



Exhausted and forlorn after walking for miles to get into Zaire, a mother and child slump by the roadside.

This was not my first trip to Goma. Seven years ago I had stayed a few nights in transit as I travelled down through eastern Zaire for a hiking holiday in neighboring Uganda. Goma was a dusty backwater then, with a population of maybe 150,000, and I remember thinking, fat chance it would ever see me again. Now here I was.

Most of the Goma press pack were journalists who stalk from one hot spot to another — El Salvador, Somalia, Bosnia. Do the Mogu proclaimed a T-shirt worn by more than one reporter. That's what they call Mogadishu. War stories are swapped the way alumni talk about school days. Stripes have to be earned and I felt invisible in their midst.

For a while I hung back, keeping my distance, at least where taking photographs was concerned. If hardened veterans could not cope with this, what was I to think? How could I photograph such scenes of anguish without feeling insensitive, intrusive, like a voyeur? (To Page 8)

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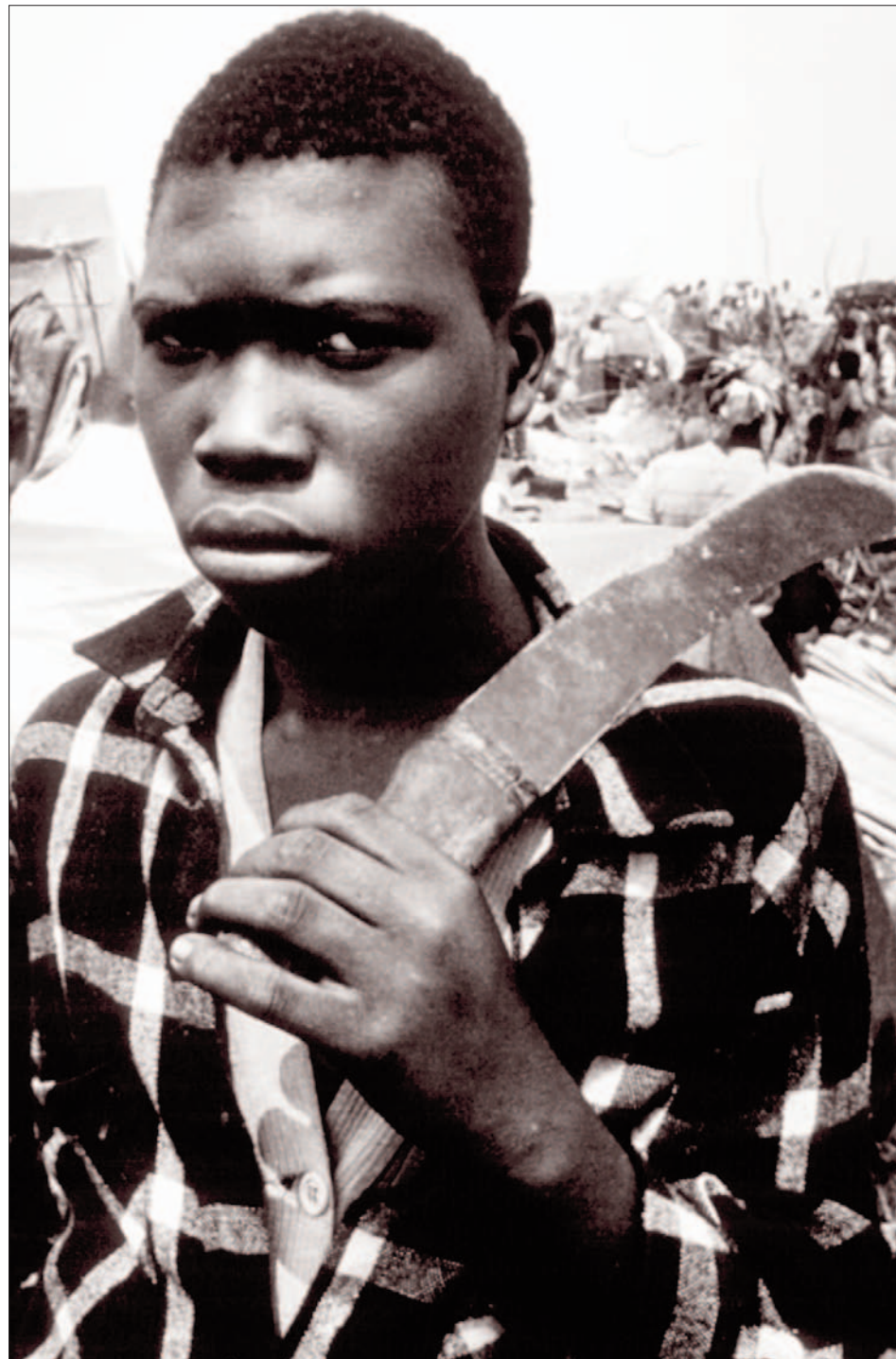
“Please forgive me, I thought, as I raised my camera and moved another step closer”



Doctors carry a dying Hutu refugee in the Miningi ‘cholera’ camp outside Goma.



A woman comforts a sick relative at the camp.



Young Hutu refugee carries a panga, the killing weapon of choice in Rwanda.

(From Page 7) These were my thoughts the first time I picked my way among the dead and the sobbing in the cholera camp of Miningi 12 kilometers from Goma, and stuck my camera right in the face of a dying woman. She lay groaning on the inhospitable black volcanic rock of the area. The cholera would overtake her within hours, maybe minutes, and she would die in a pool of her own diarrhea and vomit.

How would I feel if the tables were turned? Would I be outraged at the seeming insensitivity of the act I was committing? Her eyes conveyed no such sentiment. It was as though she knew I could do nothing to save her, not me or the pathetically understaffed and ill-equipped Medecins Sans Frontieres volunteers who scurried around us.

Despite this, I felt there existed a complicity between us, as if she understood the

power of a moment frozen in time. Please forgive me, I thought, as I raised my camera and moved a step closer. Back at the press tent it was all action. Journalists sat hunkered over laptops and around banks of video equipment. Photographers rushed off to process their film. Rows of portable satellite dishes beamed digital information off into space and down onto TV screens around the world. Deadlines had to be met.

Just a matter of feet away, separated from the journalists by huge coils of barbed wire, were the refugees, streaming by. At one point, we are all subjected to the sight of a mob beating to death a young boy, a suspected Tutsi informer.

It was a surreal scene, this confluence of technology and man-made disaster.

That evening I transmitted a photograph back to The Globe and Mail. First it went to London, then to Washington, then

to Canada, all in a matter of minutes. The photograph showed a young boy dying of starvation and thirst while lying feet from hundreds of sacks of rice and grain. It took over a week for that food to arrive.

It was the plight of the children that was hardest to take. Not old enough to grasp what was happening, or to be responsible for any of it, they were dragged from their homes, hacked to death or killed by the stampeding feet of adults, or left orphans.

Now back in Canada in the safety and sanity of our world, I am trying to make sense of something that simply defies logic. The reactions to the photographs and film footage are uniform: incredulity and dismay.

Heads are lowered, tears well. And the questions keep coming: How did you manage? How could you go through with it? One friend suggests I am in denial. Some-

one else wants to know what I dream about.

It may sound strange, even callous, but as I sit here in emotional decompression, I cannot help but think of the dying faces that I focused my camera on, and wonder at the process that has been triggered in my conscience. Grace, at the end, is a universal desire. None of us wants to die an anonymous death. That is as far as I've got.

That I have witnessed such a cauldron as Goma will undoubtedly mark me for life, but I have no more answers than the next man. I have been there, peering into freshly dug mass-graves, and you can ask, but I cannot answer. ■

Russell Monk is a Toronto-based freelance photographer. This article and some of the photographs appeared in The Globe And Mail's Saturday Focus section.