

**First Lady Jeannette Kagame's Address
at the "BeFree" Nation Building Dialogue**

Windhoek, Namibia

20 August 2019

My Dear Sister, Excellency Monica Geingos, First Lady of the Republic of Namibia,

Honourable Members of Parliament and Cabinet,

Distinguished Leaders of the Academia,

Speakers of Today's Dialogue,

Young Women and Young Men,

Dear Youth,

Dear Nation Builders,

Good Afternoon.

It is a great honour and pleasure to be with you here today, and particularly, to be part of the “**BeFree**” Nation Building Dialogue, that seeks to promote open discourse among Namibians, across different demographics and backgrounds, on important themes of national relevance.

Today's theme, ‘**Rebuilding the Identity of a Post-Conflict Society**’ is close to my heart, and the hearts of Rwandans, as it speaks to the journey upon which we embarked, in the aftermath of the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi.

As such, I am grateful for this opportunity, not only to share our experiences, but to also hear, and learn from yours.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As is common in most countries in Africa, that have experienced conflict, Rwanda's dark past had an equally dark underbelly: divisionism, hate and violence.

Through bad leadership and the politics of hate, the hearts and minds of Rwandans were manipulated by a post-colonial ruling elite, solely seeking to hold on to power, for themselves.

In a land of one common language, one religion, and no borders separating ethnic groups, these divisive politics led to an artificial divide in our people, in families, neighbors and friends turned foes; mothers killed their children, born from inter-ethnic marriages.

In July 1994, our nation was faced with an indescribable sense of despair as there were:

- About 100,000 women victims of mass rapes, as part of a widespread intent to infect them with HIV/AIDS,
- 50,000 widows and 75,000 inconsolable orphans,
- 650,000 internally displaced persons,
- 2 million refugees fled to neighbouring countries after the Genocide,
- 1 million men, women, and children massacred in just 100 days.

25 years later:

- we still seek healing,
- we still seek inner and collective peace;
- we still seek dialogue as a vehicle for national unity and reconciliation, as a means to ensure sustainable national development, and more importantly, the only route to sustain the gains that have so far been won.

Distinguished Guests, Dear Youth,

Among the various mechanisms and solutions we employed, to facilitate our journey to healing, to peace, and to the inclusive transformation that we are experiencing today in Rwanda; open dialogue was and still is, at the heart of all our efforts.

At the other end of the balance, and throughout the country, Rwandans also pursued justice for crimes against humanity, engaging with their leaders, their communities and each other, through different homegrown solutions and systems.

They did so, because they knew these locally-designed solutions would provide a common vision and collective sense of responsibility, towards forging a stronger nation.

At the individual level, Organisations, such as my Foundation, the Imbuto Foundation, that share the vision of a unified and dignified Rwanda, have created platforms that promote dialogue and the sharing of knowledge, in a bid to find solutions and generate ideas, especially among the youth.

To this end, we created the **Youth Forum Series**, a platform, in the same lines of the “BeFree Dialogues”, to allow the youth, aged between 16 and 30 years - who make up 26.6% of our population - to discuss and address their challenges, related to the legacy of Genocide, to identify common solutions and to work towards personal development and actualization. Each Youth Forum addresses a unique theme relevant to our goals and aspirations as a nation.

Excellency First Lady, Distinguished Guests,

It is at the inspiration of one of these Forums that a young man, Charles, authored the book ‘*Moi le Dernier Tutsi*’, as his own way of unloading his burden, and sharing his personal story of the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi. In his book, he recounts the tragic deaths of almost his entire family, slaughtered before his eyes. He speaks of his pain, his healing process and overcoming this tragedy. Charles is now part of the workforce that is contributing to Rwanda’s development, and helping others overcome the wounds

of the Genocide.

It is also through a Youth Forum that Toni* (whose real name is concealed for his safety) changed his narrative and trajectory in life. His parents committed genocide and fled to France when he was only one year old. Having attended one of the series, he yearned to learn more about his homeland and history, and later engaged with and mobilized other youth, in a similar situation as his own, to do the same and to return home to rebuild their country.

Our Youth Forum Series which cater for youth and young professionals, from the ages of 16 to 30, feed into larger efforts at the National Level to instill values of unity, dignity and self-reliance in young Rwandans, through this initiative that brings together Rwandan youth living within the country and in the Diaspora.

Since 2016, over 1,900 youth, the majority representing the Diaspora, have convened in Rwanda.

Indeed, such events afford the youth a lifetime chance to engage frankly and openly with leaders to better understand their country, its vision and their responsibility in carrying Rwanda's vision to the next

level.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Rebuilding the identity of a society after conflict, is neither easy nor is it guaranteed to succeed.

- It requires deep introspection, to unpack and identify what went wrong to begin with.
- It requires collective honesty and the fortitude to face the ugly truth of the past and admit that it happened.
- It requires the patience to go through the painful steps of healing: anger, the desire for retribution, the inevitability of forgiveness and quest for closure through unity and reconciliation.

For the perpetrators, there is a journey too: for some it is a sorrowful path of guilt, shame, inner turmoil, and great relief on receiving the portended olive branch.

Yet for the hard-core offenders, they persist in genocide denial, hateful vengeance and the macabre ideology of committing another genocide!

Rebuilding the identity of a society after conflict requires the resolve to build inclusive systems, and to give equal chances.

It demands a complete departure from all things that brought the conflict in the first place, and it must, of necessity, be about creating the space to collectively identify, and solve problems together in the most innovative of ways.

On the larger scale, it requires nations to share their experiences, and mutually learn from each other for posterity.

Distinguished Guests,

For us to undo the consequences of past conflicts, we must level the ground, upon which the custodians of the future, our youth, must build. We must not pass on hate, but love; not division but unity; not revenge but forgiveness.

We can only do this by, openly and fully speaking about the trials and lessons of our past, the challenges and triumphs of today, and the hopes and aspirations for a better tomorrow.

Dearest Youth,

To think that the past does not involve you, is an easy thing to do. However, for you to take up the mantle, pick up from where we have left, and to build a better, more prosperous future, you have no choice but to draw from the past and the present.

Excellency First Lady, dear Sister,

I once again thank you very much for this invitation. I hope that through our discussions today, we will take back home with us, ideas, strategies and collective wisdom that will help us improve the lives of our people in settings of lasting peace, unity and reconciliation.

Most importantly, I hope that our deliberations today, will leave the youth, here present, inspired and revving to become peace bearers and change makers within their communities, their countries and our beloved continent, Africa.

Indeed, we should all strive to build a continent, which rises above divisive politics – while working hard for its own development, and the holistic well-being of all its communities – so we can truly create the fertile grounds, out of which will emerge the future generations, we deserve.

I thank you for your kind attention.