

[Home](#) / [War history](#) / [Units](#) / [United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda \(UNAMIR\)](#)

United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR)

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The central African country of Rwanda is a small, landlocked country about two-fifths the size of Tasmania. Its population of about seven million is divided into two main groups - the Tutsi and Hutu. When German anthropologists explored the country during the nineteenth century, they perceived the social organisation of the local population into two groups as a biological division. The Germans consequently emphasised differences between Tutsi and Hutu. They described the Tutsi as being animal herders who were taller and lighter-skinned than the crop-growing Hutu. Although the Hutu were the ethnic majority, they were regarded as being subordinate to the Tutsi. The two groups, however, shared the same language, culture, and religion and intermarried with each other. It was possible for Tutsi to become Hutu and vice versa. The distinction was mainly one of social caste. The country was controlled by a sophisticated kingdom, with satellite kingdoms in the west and north; kinship was based on clan.

After the First World War, the German colony of Rwanda was mandated to Belgium. The Belgians relied on the Tutsi ruling class to administer the country and the Tutsi retained their privileged position. The Belgians also issued identity cards which defined people as Tutsi or Hutu. When Rwanda became independent in 1962 it was ruled by a predominantly Hutu government. Attacks on Tutsi led many to flee to neighbouring Uganda, where they lived in exile for the next 30 years.

In 1990 the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF), dominated by Tutsis, invaded Rwanda from Uganda and a three-year civil war ensued. In August 1993 the warring groups agreed to a power-sharing arrangement and a joint Tutsi-Hutu government was formed. In June the United Nations (UN) Security Council had agreed to send a small group of military observers to monitor the Uganda-Rwanda border. In August the military observers were replaced with the larger United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR). With just over 2,000 personnel, UNAMIR was to supervise the transition from war to peace by monitoring the ceasefire, assisting with demobilisation and mine clearance, and generally facilitate conditions that would allow a transitional government to take over.

UNAMIR began deploying to Kigali, Rwanda's capital, in late-1993. However, the early months of 1994 the peace process began to break down and on 6 April Rwanda's president was killed when the plane he was travelling in was shot down. Within 48 hours Hutu extremists seized control of the Rwandan government and began instigating genocide.

The killing began in Kigali and quickly moved out to the country. Tutsis were the main victims, but so too were moderate Hutus. The killing was well-planned and organised. The Rwandan army units deemed "loyal", were given the priority task of committing the genocide and were aided by extremist militias - the interahamwe. Weaker army units fought the RPF as the civil war continued. With violence escalating, the general population also took part in the killing, encouraged by the Rwandan government, army, and militias.

In just three months, from April to July, up to 800,000 people - almost a tenth of the population - were brutally murdered and killed: almost two million people fled their homes and became refugees. The RPF, though, "won" the civil war, capturing Kigali and other major centres in July. It then invited the UN to assist in stabilising the situation.

UNAMIR could do little to stop the genocide. As the situation worsened, Belgium withdrew its UN personnel and it was debated if all of UNAMIR should be withdrawn. However, in May the UN Security Council decided to enlarge UNAMIR with an additional 5,500 troops. Known as UNAMIR II, its task was to "contribute to the security and protection of displaced persons, refugees and civilians at risk in Rwanda", including, where possible, the establishment of "secure humanitarian areas". Australia agreed to send a medical team to provide support for UNAMIR II personnel and, as a secondary role, to provide humanitarian relief to the Rwandans. Australia sent two contingents to Rwanda, each one serving for six months.

The first Australian contingent, of 308 members, arrived in the country in late-August. It was under the command of Colonel Wayne Ramsey, a medical officer, and based on a field hospital. Under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Patrick McIntosh, the Australian Medical Support Force protected medical personnel. It consisted of a medical company, an infantry company group from 2/4 RAR, four Armoured Personnel Carriers, and a logistic support company. The medical company included two specialist surgical teams, a preventative medical section, a medical support platoon (providing pathology and pharmacy functions), and a dental capacity. The medical unit was not based on an established medical unit but instead drew its members from the three services - 17 from the RAAF, seven from the RAN, and the rest from the army. Twenty-six members of the medical team were women.

Flying into Kigali, the Australians based themselves at the Kigali Central Hospital, which had been badly

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[First World War](#)

[Second World War](#)

[Malayan Emergency](#)

[Korean War](#)

[Vietnam, 1962-1972](#)

[Confrontation, 1963-1966 \(Indonesia, Malaysia, Borneo\)](#)

[East Timor, 1999-2000](#)

[All units listed alphabetically](#)

damaged during the fighting. They set up an operating theatre in the only room without holes in the roof from mortar shells. The Australians also had the only working X-ray centre in Rwanda, the only blood bank, the only intensive care unit, and the only air-conditioned operating theatre.

Although the contingent was tasked to provide medical assistance to UNAMIR II, most cases treated by the Australians were Rwandans. The contingent also trained local hospital staff and sent small groups to provincial towns to provide medical aid. Infantry soldiers accompanied the medical teams and gave them protection.

The second contingent, commanded by Colonel Peter Warfe, took over from the first during the last weeks of February 1995. Lieutenant Colonel Damien Roche commanded the medical support force that included B Company 2 RAR, engineers from the 3rd Combat Engineer Regiment, and armoured personnel carriers from B Squadron 3rd/4th Cavalry Regiment. Surgeons and other medical specialists, mainly from the Army Reserve, as well as the RAN and RAAF Reserve, were rotated through the force on a six-week basis.

On 19 April 1995 a group of 32 Australian soldiers and medical personnel were sent to the Kibeho refugee camp to assist refugees and UNAMIR activities. The situation within the camp was desperate. There was little food or water and the refugees, mostly Hutu who may have taken part in the earlier genocide, were harassed by the RPF.

From 20 to 23 April the RPF began to close down and empty the camp. The already tense situation descended into a violent massacre, with the RPF killing around 4,000 people and injuring 600. The medical team, led by Captain Coral Vaughan-Evans, struggled to cope with the sheer volume of wounded, many of whom were evacuated to Kigali hospital.

In addition to the Australian troops, a company of Zambian peacekeepers was also in Kibeho when the massacre began. Under UNAMIR's mandate, the troops and peacekeepers could have intervened in the conflict but were seriously outnumbered by RPF and risked also being killed. Moreover, it would have been hard to fire without killing refugees. Hence, under the command of Lieutenant Thomas Tilbrock, the Australian infantrymen did not open fire to defend the refugees - a situation the men found particularly distressing. A debriefing team was later sent to Rwanda to counsel the Australians who were present at the massacre. It was later argued that UN presence at Kibeho stopped the RPF from killing everyone in the camp and creating an even worse outcome.

After the Kibeho massacre the Australians concentrated on training the Rwandans to whom they handed over some hospital duties. In August the Australians were replaced by a team of 30 civilians from Norway. Responsibility for the hospital was handed over to the Norwegians and Rwandans, and the Australians returned home.

Casualties

- Nil killed
- 3 wounded

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