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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

A Death in Burundi

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A YOUNG man named Claude Niyokindi was shot to death the other day, on the morning of July 13, on the outskirts of a rural village in the east-central African nation of Burundi. It is a country so little known in the West that an immigration agent at Kennedy Airport recently admitted that she'd never heard of it. ("Are you sure it isn't Burma?" she asked.) Why should Americans take notice of one killing more or less, in a faraway country in a world full of murder and mayhem? Maybe it ought to be enough to paraphrase John Donne and say that any death diminishes all of us. But there are other circumstances that seem worth mentioning.

Burundi is a small, ancient, landlocked, mountainous nation that exports excellent tea and coffee and not much else, a country with a rich and, in modern times, a tragic history, tragic in large part because of European colonialism. It is a history intimately connected with the history of Rwanda, its neighbor to the north. In the post-colonial era, Rwanda and Burundi accentuated each other's path toward mass violence. Most Americans surely remember hearing news of Rwanda's infamous genocide, which began in 1994. But many know little or nothing of Burundi's related catastrophe, an ethnic civil war that began in October 1993, lasted 13 long years and killed, it is estimated, about 300,000 Burundians.

The country now has a democratically elected government, but it receives considerably less aid than Rwanda, and is in desperate shape. The war has turned a poor country into one of the very poorest in the world and also into one of the sickest. In almost every category, Burundi's public health statistics rank among the world's most abysmal. Collectively the numbers describe an excruciating burden of suffering for a population that has already endured more than a decade of deprivation, terror and loss — of rainy nights spent hiding in forests, of meals made out of the leaves of bean plants, of the brutal deaths of friends and family.

In 2006, a small group of Americans, led by a Burundian-American, created an organization called Village Health Works. They dreamed of helping Burundi find a new beginning. They started by trying to bring decent public health and medicine to a rural village named Kigutu. The system they created now provides, among many other services, food to the hungriest people in the area and clean water to all of them, and it is also a medical center that in its first year and a half has treated 28,000 patients, most of them without charge.

The sick come there not just from the local area, but from all parts of Burundi and even on weeklong treks from other countries, from Congo and Tanzania. And some visitors have come, not for medical help, but

only to look at the clinic. When asked why he was there, one of these travelers replied, “To see America.”

In fact, many volunteers and almost all the money behind Village Health Works come from the United States, but the inspiration behind it was both Burundian and American, and the entire enterprise, with its aim of making public health indigenous and lasting, has been built on a close alliance with Burundi’s health authorities. Committees of villagers — the most effective has been the women’s committee — have a real say in policy and operations. Moreover, all of the permanent staff — the lab technicians, community health workers, nurses and the chief doctor — are Burundian. Claude Niyokindi was the system’s skillful, universally trusted and beloved driver — but the term doesn’t begin to suggest the importance and difficulty of his job in a country of dangerous roads and no speed limits.

Claude was taking medicines and some staff members to Kigutu, when several young men waylaid the vehicle, robbed everyone inside, then started shooting. It isn’t clear whether the motive was robbery or, as some suspect, intimidation — an attempt by unknown parties to terrorize the clinic’s staff and patients. What is clear is that Village Health Works will endure and grow. When they heard the news of Claude’s murder, residents of Kigutu formed a human shield around their clinic. In the days that followed, hundreds, including the governor of the province, attended rallies at the site.

In his widely publicized [speech](#) in Ghana recently, President Obama imagined a “partnership” between the United States and Africa, one “grounded in mutual responsibility” that might help Africans pursue the intimately related goals of “democracy, opportunity, health and the peaceful resolution of conflict.” Village Health Works is one small example, a model of African and American cooperation, President Obama’s lofty vision embodied in miniature, an instrument of peace. Claude Niyokindi died in its service.

Tracy Kidder is the author of the forthcoming “Strength in What Remains.”

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