



Planting of the Peace Pole ceremony in the Rulindo District



By Mark Scott, Intern with SEP

The Rulindo District situated in the Northern Province of Rwanda, not far from Kigali, was the scene of devastation during the genocide. Almost two decades on the wounds of that genocide are still very much felt, and reconciliation in the area is a necessary and continuous task. In light of this, Shalom Educating for Peace has been involved in the creation of a dialogue space where people may come to discuss their stories and find restoration. In this space five avocado trees were planted as a symbol of hope for future reconciliation. These trees are now beginning to sprout. Yesterday on the 15th January 2012, another ceremony took place in this garden to symbolically declare peace over the region and a commitment to healing and forgiveness. It took the form of a Peace Pole, joining 200 000 planted around the world, with the message: "May Peace Prevail on Earth".

The ceremony consisted of members of the community, leaders of the district and nation, academics, members of Shalom Educating for Peace, a local peace club, and the Media. Proceedings begun with a song and dance by the peace club, made up of the youth in the region. The role of young people in the district and the nation as a whole has been pivotal in bringing about reconciliation. Most were born after the genocide and yet have grown up under its shadow. Their joyful noise that opened the ceremony captured the voice of young people in Rwanda who are seeking to bridge divides and heal cleavages that have served to define their nation for generations before them.

Once introductions were then made, those present began to march from the garden to the genocide memorial. Here further words were spoken and respect was paid. It was a reminder to all present why they were here. Thousands of bodies have been buried at the site which has been an ongoing process, marking the scale of the atrocity that took place here. Adjacent to the memorial is a new and developing library to be a source of education for the people of Rulindo on the genocide.

On arriving at the library, it began pouring with rain, and the ceremony continued in the library.

Here we saw a play performed by the peace club exploring reconciliation and its pursuit, both honest and dishonest. Also, the powerful testimony of a genocide victim and perpetrator was heard. Their willingness to move on from the past and seek restitution was a moving contribution to the ceremony. Seeing them standing side-by-side later on in the ceremony, as the Peace Pole was planted, laughing and talking with one another is a significant testament to the work of the people in the region as well as the individual choices of those involved to build for a united Rwanda. Messages and encouragement from around the world was also heard, read by visiting academics in peace and conflict from Canada and the USA.



Then came the big moment! The weather had cleared just in time as everyone headed back towards the garden. A circle formed around the space in which the trees had been planted and the community began to decide where to place the pole. Almost unanimously, the centre of the garden was chosen as the spot for the Peace Pole to be planted. What proceeded is a very special event and one that has been shared around the world in over 180 countries. Rulindo joins the Allenby Bridge between Israel and Jordan, the War Museum in Vietnam, Robben

Island in South Africa, where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned, and the site of the baptism of Jesus at Bethany-Beyond-the-Jordan as places in which Peace Poles have been placed. The list of those involved in Peace Pole ceremonies includes the likes of Mother Theresa, the Dalai Lama and President Jimmy Carter.

Thus, the pole was placed in the centre of the garden declaring 'May Peace Prevail on Earth' in English, Swahili, French and Kinyarwanda. The children gathered the rocks and placed it around the base of the pole to fix it in place before the cement was added. Final sentiments were made, including a speech by a representative of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission praising the work of Shalom Educating for Peace and those in the Rulindo District who were striving after peace and reconciliation. Photos were taken as the community huddled around the pole and there was just enough time for interviews with Rwandan television and the press.

Shalom Educating for Peace wishes to thank all those who attended this special event. It was truly a memorable occasion and we hope the sentiment that has been planted in Rulindo will continue to grow and flourish. As Verdeja comments, paralleling reconciliation and society to the establishment of a healthy tree, "the belief in a healthy tree, strong in its foundations and confident in its branches, gives hope to the possibility of a better future".

