

Theoneste Bagosora, the Rwandan military leader dubbed the “Colonel of the Apocalypse”, has died in Mali where he was serving a life sentence for his role in the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi that killed more than a million people.

Bagosora’s death, aged 80, was announced by his son in a Facebook post on Saturday that read “R.I.P. Papa”. It was confirmed on Sunday.

“Theoneste Bagosora died in a hospital in Mali yesterday (Saturday) late morning,” said Abubacarr Tambadou, registrar for the Mechanism for International Criminal Tribunals, which oversees prosecution of those responsible for the genocide.

Bagosora was jailed in 2008 for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes, though his sentence was reduced to 35 years on appeal in 2011.

In April 1994, Colonel Bagosora was the most senior official under the minister of defence — and with a reported grudge against the then president Juvenal Habyarimana after being passed over for promotion to general.

French military intelligence concluded Bagosora was one of the prime sponsors behind the April 6 assassination of both president Habyarimana and his Burundian counterpart Cyprien Ntaryamira — both Hutus — as well as the Rwandan army chief of staff.

Their Falcon plane was shot down when preparing to land in the Rwandan capital Kigali, an event many blamed on RPA rebels and which triggered the massacres.

“The assassination of moderate opposition ministers and Tutsis less than half an hour after the explosion of the presidential Falcon would confirm the high degree of preparation of this operation,” according to the intelligence memo from September 1994, revealed in 2019.

- Most senior officer -

A few days later, the foreign minister and Hutu moderate was killed by soldiers. Bagosora and Boniface Ngurinzira had clashed constantly during 1993 peace talks in Tanzania.

Bagosora accused Ngurinzira of making too many concessions to the rebels and, on his return to Rwanda, reportedly said he was heading home “to prepare the Apocalypse” — something he denied in court hearings.

Bagosora denied any direct role in the genocide, though he was seen as part of a Hutu extremist faction in the country.

With the defence minister also out of the country on a mission, Bagosora was the most senior military official from April 6-9, the first days of the genocide — when extremists rounded on the Tutsi majority, Hutu moderates and those from mixed lineages in an orgy of bloodletting that shocked the world.

Bagosora's life sentence was reduced to 35 years in 2011, but a request for early release denied earlier this year

The appeal court in 2011 found that while there was no evidence he ordered the massacres, Bagosora knew they were planned and did nothing to stop them, even though he was in a position to do so.

Bagosora was serving his sentence in Koulikoro prison in Mali, but had been transferred to a clinic in the capital Bamako, an official in the Malian prison administration told AFP.

An official at the institution where he was admitted said he died of "heart failure", without giving further details.

Bagosora had in April been refused an application for early release because of the "extremely high gravity (of his) crimes".