MICHEL MARTIN, host:

We switch gears now for a story from Rwanda. You'll probably remember that in the mid-1990s, a horrific conflict between the country's two main ethnic groups, the Hutus and the Tutsis, resulted in the massacre of hundreds of thousands of Tutsis and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of others of both groups. Since then, Rwanda has been trying to repair its civic life after the genocide, and that struggle, in part, has led to a change in language. The Rwandan government wants to replace French with English as the language of business, diplomacy and scholarship.

We wanted to know more, so we called Stephanie Nolen. She's a correspondent for the Canadian newspaper the Globe and Mail. She is based in South Africa, but she recently returned from a trip to Rwanda. And I asked her which languages most Rwandans speak now.

Ms. STEPHANIE NOLEN (Correspondent, Globe and Mail): The one language everybody has in common is Kinyarwanda, the indigenous language of Rwanda. Anyone who has had some education and who’s spent most of their lives there will also speak French, which has been the colonial language since the 1920s. It was imported by the Belgians, and the education system until very recently ran in French. A small handful of people speak English. But crucially, they happen to be the people who run the place. So the president, Paul Kagame, speaks, actually, not very good French but fluent English, and many of the people around him also are English speakers.

The reason is that they were exiles. Of course, there was violence between Hutu and Tutsis long before 1994 in the genocide, and many Tutsis had fled the country before then, like President Kagame's family, to the English-speaking countries of Uganda and Tanzania. They grew up speaking English, and when they came back and became the government, when they won the war then ended the genocide, they brought an English-speaking culture with them.

MARTIN: What was the reason given for the government order? Was a reason given?
Ms. NOLEN: The reason given is that Rwanda is working extremely hard to recreate itself as the IT hub of Africa and as a country that will be a tourism and business destination. And their argument is English is increasingly the language of international business. It's the language of technology, and they say this is the way forward. English is the language that holds the promise for young Rwandans. That's the official word.

MARTIN: And do people believe that?

Ms. NOLEN: No. Not for a minute.

(Soundbite of laughter)

Ms. NOLEN: Look, it's - clearly, Rwanda is working very hard with this business agenda. For example, they're about to become the first country in the world to provide free broadband to the entire nation. So, which is sort of interesting given that, you know, about half the population is illiterate. But I think, actually, there's a political motivation behind it. There's the practical fact that the people in charge are English speakers. And their President Kagame and the people around him make no effort to hide the fact that they are profoundly bitter with the French.

The French government, of course, was arming and training and equipping the Hutu forces who carried out the genocide, not only up until the genocide but long after it had started. And the French, it's become increasingly obvious since 1994, are deeply implicated in what happened there. The relationship between the governments of Rwanda and France has been severed, and they have no interest, essentially, in speaking French, in being part of the international community of French-speaking nations.

MARTIN: Wow.

Ms. NOLEN: They are very deliberately, I think, turning their back on French and all...

MARTIN: On France and the French heritage. How is this decision being received? I know it's hard to gauge the sentiment, you know, of an entire country. But what did you hear when you were there?
Ms. NOLEN: Well, it was sort of interesting. I heard a lot of people who'd grown up speaking French - at least outside of their home, it was the language of business previously - struggling to speak in perfect English. It was a real shock for me because I've been going to Rwanda every couple of years for about 10 years. And I got off the plane this time, and I said, bonsoir, and expected someone to say, bienvenue, and instead I got, welcome to Rwanda. And the taxi driver said, welcome to Kigali. And I thought, hang on a second.

And so clearly, at least somewhat educated people, people who see the way the wind is blowing, are making a real effort to speak English. And there are small institutions teaching English springing up all over Kigali and the other larger cities. Now all the road signs and the immigration people work and business names are all in English. So people sense that they need to really make an effort around English.

They are also a lot people who seem to feel a bit dismayed that if they had limited education and sort of barely managed to master French that is really going to be a challenge. But you know, a lot of people share President Kagame's frustration with the French, and they certainly sympathize with the political motivation behind this.

MARTIN: Any reaction from the French to this?

Ms. NOLEN: No. Not officially. They have said only that they really think they have nothing to say about it. There was, apparently, at the meeting of the Francophone(ph), which was held in Quebec in Canada only a couple of days after this decision, there was apparently some group discussion around the value of at least bilingualism and a suggestion that perhaps Rwanda could consider preserving both. But that doesn't seem to appeal very much in Kigali.

MARTIN: Is there any chance that this would also be seen as evidence of a tribal rift, given that the French were closely allied with the Hutu, who carried out the genocide? Is there a danger, then, that sort of the language of choice is going to be yet another social division?

Ms. NOLEN: No. I really don't think that there is. It's not ethnically allied at this point at all. There remains severe tension between the groups because, you know, you can declare as many reconciliation efforts as you
want to, but it doesn't actually change people's deep feelings of resentment - total legitimate feelings of resentment. So I wouldn't say that the tension and the ill feelings are gone in any way. In fact, Rwanda remains one of the tensest places I ever been.

But language is not one of their things at all. Both Hutu and Tutsi have, since time immemorial, spoken Kinyarwand, and that's common to both ethnic groups and spoken only by Hutus and Tutsis, and English or French are not considered particularly the language of one or the other.

MARTIN: So what was it like over the course of your visit? You got off the plane expecting to speak French and all of the sudden, you, you know, were back in an English-speaking world. Was it hard to switch for you? Even though you come from a bilingual country, is it weird? Did people frown at you if you spoke French? Did you - did you forget?

Ms. NOLEN: Amazingly, it actually reminded me a lot of being at home. It made me a little bit homesick. I'm from Montreal, and I spend all of my time there flipping back and forth between the languages and never, you know, trying to anticipate what someone I speak to is going to speak. Will they be an Anglophone or a Francophone? And I found myself doing it in Rwanda. I'd start a conversation, and I'd be wrong.

(Soundbite of laughter)

Ms. NOLEN: And I'd have to change gears. And it was weirdly a lot like Canada.

MARTIN: Well, bonsoir, mon ami.

(Soundbite of laughter)

Ms. NOBEL: Et vous, aussi. Au revoir.

MARTIN: Stephanie Nolen is a correspondent for the Toronto Globe and Mail. She spoke to us from Johannesburg. Thank you so much for speaking with us.

Ms. NOBEL: You're very welcome.