The ugly face of white racism

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Image
A Ku Klux Klan ceremony in Atlanta, Georgia, in the 1930s - AFP
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This story was published by Agence France-Presse in 2005 when Ku Klux Klan member Edgar Ray Killen was jailed for 60 years for the 1964 killing of three civil rights activists in Mississippi.

PHILADELPHIA, June 23, 2005 (AFP) - The Ku Klux Klan (KKK), a racist and violent organization that massed as many as two million members in the 1920s, casts a long shadow over US history.

Founded in 1866 in the state of Tennessee, it brought together a small number of apologists for US slavery who took part in showy rituals bearing flaming torches, and wore white hoods and gowns often decorated with astrological signs.

- Terrorize former slaves -

The following year the Klan became a paramilitary force under former Southern officers such as General Nathan Bedford Forrest, the first Grand Imperial Wizard of the so-called invisible empire.

The Klan's goal at the time was to terrorize former slaves who won the right to vote in 1867. Members hoped to undo what the Civil War and voting booths had brought about.

This early Klan gradually faded away as Southern conservatives in time implemented a web of segregationist laws.

The year 1915 saw a new Klan emerge to take aim not only against blacks but also against Roman Catholics, whom it suspected of anti-US activities, as well as new immigrants and anyone it construed as an affront to moral order.

By the early 1920s the Klan had attracted at least two million to its ranks. In August 1925, 40,000 Klan members marched outside the White House. Influential politicians were among its members.

Infighting and schisms rocked the movement until it had all but disappeared by the late 1930s.

- Energized by rights movement -

By 1945 a new Klan had developed with a presence mainly in some Southern states. The 1960s civil rights era energized its protest activities.

But the group's violent stands clashed with mainstream US opinion and helped marginalize the Klan.

In 1963 four little girls were killed in a bomb blast at an Alabama church, and in 1964 three young civil rights activists were killed in Mississippi.

In the Mississippi crimes jurors on Tuesday found former Ku Klux Klan leader Edgar Ray Killen guilty on three counts of manslaughter, on the 41st anniversary of the murder of the three civil rights activists.

On Thursday a judge sentenced Killen to the maximum 60 years in prison for the killings.

He had been tried in 1967 for the murder of Michael Schwerner, 24, Andy Goodman, 20, and James Chaney, 21, but the all-white jury was unable to reach a verdict after one member said she could not convict a preacher.

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