

Interview with Hubert Sauper, co-director of Kisangani Diary

"We cannot call ourselves democrats when people are still treated like animals"

Stefan Steinberg
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I said that I thought one of the principal merits of Kisangani Diary was that it refuted the notion that the conflict in Zaire was simply the product of tribalism and nationalism. Many in the media presented the victory of Kabila's army as the national liberation of Zaire.

Sauper: "That's what it was—national liberation. Kabila was liberating Zaire in the interests of Anglophone Africa—at the same time kicking out the French and the Belgians. If any one says it is just a tribal war then that's just an excuse; it's a huge pretext. The French were sending guns and Serbian mercenaries to bolster the Hutus. Britain, America and South Africa were supporting Kabila, with the assistance of Uganda and Rwanda.

"For example, there was one media report of a massacre at Kisangani. The BBC said the killings were carried out by villagers. When we heard the news, we thought Kabila and his troops must have been responsible. But then we received a letter from a very good American friend who lived near the river. She confirmed that the massacre was carried out directly by the Rwandan military. It was like a safari. They took a plane over the border, transferred to trucks and then attacked the refugee camps at night, raking the camps with machine gun fire. But the media says it was just villagers. The anger we felt about the situation was a motivation to make the film. The biggest crime against these people is that they were forgotten, their plight was forgotten. In our society, images—film images—guarantee a sort of immortality. Despite their terrible plight these people greeted us warmly and were happy and grateful that they were being filmed.

"At the beginning of our stay we attended the

meeting of the UN helpers. But then, for example, on the question of food transportation it was said that 'logistical problems' would prevent a food shipment from going to the camps. The daily meetings of the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] were like meetings of a group of factory managers. We objected, we were angry, we said waiting three days would mean the loss of hundreds of lives. But there was very little impetus to act among the UN people. These human errors and 'logistical problems' cost thousands of lives. Then we were told by the UN that we shouldn't come to any more meetings.

"This lack of respect for the victims also became clear in the camps. The people there were treated like animals. For the food distribution they had a stamp on their skin, they had numbers attached to their necks. The queues for the distribution of food (a handful of flour) were guarded by Zairian soldiers armed with big sticks. Under such conditions the people lose any sort of dignity. If there is a message from the film, it is that you cannot just throw a piece of meat at someone and say, eat this or die. On the threshold of the twenty-first century, we cannot call ourselves democrats when people are still treated like animals."

I asked what he thought could be achieved with his film.

"You create images that you hope will be understood. But when someone asks what the film can achieve then I have to answer: I do not know. At discussions following both of the showings so far the film has unleashed a major debate. At the showing in Saarbrücken one woman complained about the images we were showing. She said that the misery in Africa is a cliché. She wanted something else. But you have to

show what is taking place.

“Sharing such an experience is the responsibility of an artist. A friend of mine visited India. He rode in a taxi and the driver had a Holocaust picture attached to his dashboard. My friend asked the driver why he rode around with such a picture prominent in his cab. The driver replied, ‘We should do the same thing to the Pakistanis.’ I am sure the maker of the film about the Holocaust did not intend it to be used as an argument for another pogrom.

“You asked what can be achieved with my film. I have to say I do not know.”



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